



THE JESSE JAMES STORIES

ORIGINAL NARRATIVES OF THE JAMES BOYS

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

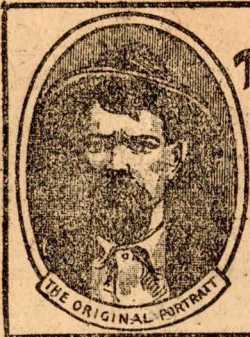
No. 15.

Price, Five Cents.

JESSE JAMES' SIGNAL CODE OR THE OUTLAW GANG'S DESPERATE STRATEGY



THE OUTLAW EXTENDED BOTH ARMS, AND TWO WEAPONS SPOKE AT ONCE.



THE JESSE JAMES STORIES

ORIGINAL NARRATIVES OF THE JAMES BOYS

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1901, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C.

No. 15.

NEW YORK, August 17, 1901.

Price Five Cents.

JESSE JAMES' SIGNAL CODE;

OR,

The Outlaw Gang's Desperate Strategy.

By W. B. LAWSON.

CHAPTER I.

SHOOTING A HORSE THIEF.

"Hold on, thar, stranger! I'd like er word with yer, if yer ain't got no objections!"

"Let her go, but cut it short, Whiskers! I'm bound for the races, and it lacks ten minutes of starting!"

"Thet thar needn't consarn yer, stranger! The Dead Level Races warn't never started on time! Goin' ter enter thet thar mustang fer ther handicap, stranger?"

"Sure! And he'll win hands down, 'though he may not look it; but what's your game? Be brief, old man!"

The last speaker, an athletic-looking fellow of twenty-five, dropped from his saddle as he spoke and began examining one of his horse's shoes, while the other, a man apparently of middle age, followed his example.

A minute later the old fellow, whose patriarchal beard

reached almost to his knees, came over and stood eyeing the mustang, critically.

"Waal, now, what I was er goin' to say was this hyar: What's ther pedigree of thet thar beast, stranger?" he said, glibly. "I'm sumthin' of er jedge of horseflesh, and thet thar beast is er hummer! Would yer mind tellin' me if yer bought him at the Montgomery stables in Kentucky?"

"How the deuce did you guess it? That's exactly where he did come from, and, by the eternal, you have his brother there, Whiskers! I never saw two beasts more alike!" cried the young man, turning his head to look at the second animal.

Slap went a massive hand on the mustang's flank, and away went the spirited animal like a flash of lightning.

The young man faced around to find himself looking into the barrel of a revolver, while the cloud of dust

kicked up by the mustang's heels obscured the landscape completely.

"So, you are a horse thief, are you? Well, I might have known it," he said, coolly. "Nature never gave any man such a set of whiskers!"

"Haw! haw! Thet thar's a fact, young man! Yer mighty philosopherkal fer one of yer age! Mout I ask yer ter oblige me by puttin' yer hands above yer head, just as er matter of form, yer know, till I git back inter ther saddle of my critter yonder?"

A snap of the trigger accompanied the request, so there was nothing to do but acquiesce, and this the young man did with marvelous good humor.

"I suppose you have a pal down the street who will stop my horse," he said, coolly.

"I reckon now I hev, stranger."

"Then I'll have to hoof it to the track. Let's see; it's a matter of five miles or more, ain't it, Whiskers?"

"I reckon it's a leetle less 'n thet thar, stranger. Sorry ter put yer ter all thet trouble, but bizness is bizness an' thet thar mustang was a genooine beauty, an' bein' er brother to my own critter hyar—waal, yer'll 'low, stranger, thet 'twas nat'ral fer me ter want ter complete ther fambly."

"Oh, yes, indeed! Quite natural! I don't blame you a bit! In fact, I'm quite in sympathy with men of your profession, Whiskers. I ain't above admitting that I'd steal a horse this minute if I had an opportunity."

"On important bizness, I reckon, stranger?"

"Important! I should say so! I was going to ride that horse against Black Panther's Winona!"

"Snakes! Yer don't say! Think yer could hev whipped ther Injun, stranger?"

"Sure! My man is on the track now, and he was going to doctor Winona five minutes before the race. She'd have petered out on the homestretch and I'd have made a couple of thousand, but you've queered all that now!"

The horse thief had regained his saddle, with his pistol in his hand, but he still lingered, with a look upon his face that bespoke considerable annoyance.

"I won't git thet thar beast back in time fer ther race," he said, finally. "What kind of er dicker will yer make if I do, stranger? Say I give yer back ther hoss an' yer chance ter win fer five thousand in gold dust!"

"I haven't got it!"

"Then thar ain't no use talkin'! Jest keep yer hands up till I tell yer ter drop 'em, will yer?"

Swinging around in his saddle so that he could keep his man under fire, the old fellow touched up his horse and moved slowly away.

His position prevented his seeing another horseman just rounding the curve ahead, and a broad smile spread over the face of the young man as he took in the situation.

"By Jove! What luck! Davis is right on time! Now, then, Whiskers, your game is up!" he muttered, exultingly.

The crack of a revolver took the horse thief by surprise, and, as the pistol was shot out of his hand, he gave a howl of pain.

"Throw up your hands and see how you like it!" roared the newcomer, with another pressure of the trigger.

"Hanged if I don't think I'll shave you with bullets! Hello, there, Carter! What's the old scoundrel been doing?"

The last was yelled at the young man, who had promptly dropped his arms and drawn his weapon and was now bounding after the startled horse thief.

He explained the situation to his friend, and a minute later the horse thief was jerked from the saddle and tied to a tree, his false whiskers were torn off and the two young men were looking him over critically.

"Hem! So you're Bink Bender, are you? I've heard of you before," said Davis, as he extracted a paper from one of the fellow's pockets. "Well, Mr. Bender, I'll relieve you of this, as I see it is a list of the horses you have stolen. What else have you about you?"

"Nothing but this!" said Carter, pulling out another paper, which he opened and glanced over with some curiosity.

Then a whistle of surprise escaped his lips, and he turned and glared at the rascal savagely.

"So you ran across Dick Williams, did you, and stole his horse?" he said, sternly.

"Now, then, tell me the truth. Did you let the young man escape, or is Williams dead and are you his murderer?"

The two young men exchanged meaning glances as they waited for an answer, but the expression on the

thief's face showed them plainer than words that he was guilty.

"Did you kill Dick Williams?" asked Davis. "Answer, or by Heaven I'll send your soul to eternity!"

The thief's teeth were chattering and his eyes were bulging, but he made one attempt to save his miserable existence.

"It was a squar' fight, gentlemen! Bizness is bizness, an' he hed'er fine bit of horseflesh! Ef he hedn't kicked I'd never hev pulled ther trigger, but——"

"But you shot him dead in order to steal his horse," said Carter, sternly.

"I 'low I shot him, gentlemen, but——"

The sentence was never finished, for Davis had dropped the hammer of his weapon, and a bullet, sent squarely through the fellow's heart, stopped his voice forever.

Then the two young men remounted the horses and set out at a gallop in the direction in which the mustang had disappeared, but, before they went, Davis exchanged hat and coat with the horse thief and even stuffed his whiskers into his pocket.

"So he killed our friend! Poor Williams!" said Carter, as they sped on like the wind, keeping a sharp lookout for the missing mustang.

"I wonder if Jesse James will be at the races!"

"Sure! He'll be disguised, no doubt, and no one will know him, but he'd hardly miss the fun, seeing he owns several of the horses."

"Then we stand a fair chance of catching him, if we are on time, old man. Hello! What in thunder is this? A Gypsy encampment!"

They had climbed a steep hill, passing a small grove at the summit, when they suddenly discovered a group of people in the valley below them.

A man and two women were bending over a fire, and not twenty feet away was the missing mustang and two other animals.

"It's Bender's gang! Quick! Get out of sight, Carter!" warned Davis. "Don't let them get a glimpse of us if we can help it! They're waiting for Bender, I suppose. Well, they're likely to have a long wait for the sinner!"

"They're moving now," answered Carter, after five minutes of watching, in which they felt sure that their presence on the hill had not been noticed.

"It looks as if they were taking the short cut to Danger

City," continued Davis. "That path through the woods leads straight to the Saquache."

As he spoke the three had mounted their horses and headed east, and the detectives waited until they were out of sight before moving from their hiding-places.

"They are trying to avoid the high road, inasmuch as the races will bring a good many people," said Carter. "No doubt they've arranged to meet Bink at Danger City. It's a great place to sell horses, especially cheap ones."

"Any old price is high for a stolen horse, but we must hurry along, old man, the races are on by this time. I wonder if I'm taking chances in wearing these togs," answered Davis.

"I fancy they were used as a disguise, so probably no one knows them, and, anyway, a horse thief is safer than a detective in this section," laughed Carter.

"There's a fellow feeling for one and only hatred for the other; but, hello! There's the race track! Gee! What a mob of people!"

"A typical gathering, with lots of firewater, I guess," said Davis, as they pulled up their horses on a little knoll overlooking the racetrack. "But what's happening, anyway? It's something unusual, old man! Quick! I'll bet it is Jesse James! He's up to some game, and they've caught him redhanded! As like as not they'll string him up quick, and if that's the case you and I'll be left at the scratch, to say nothing of losing that ten thousand dollars!"

They put spurs to their horses and galloped down the hill.

CHAPTER II.

A DARING ROBBERY.

"Pass over that dust!"

"I'll be cussed if I will! Git out of hyar, or I'll blow yer ter blazes!"

Crack!

Bang!

Two pistols spoke together, then Pete Dunston, stakeholder for the Dead Level annual races, dropped to the ground with a bullet in his heart.

Raising a small bag of gold dust from the ground, the other sprang on to the back of a magnificent horse and

THE JESSE JAMES STORIES.

dashed down the street like a cyclone, leaving fully two hundred people gaping and staring.

Then, as a cloud of dust rose from his horse's heels and almost obscured him from their sight, one man in the crowd found his voice, and yelled lustily:

"It's Jesse James, curse him! He's killed Pete, and run off with the dust! After him, men!"

A dozen men, all seasoned specimens of Colorado ranchmen, were already in the saddle, but, before they had turned their horses' heads in the right direction, the two young men, who were strangers in that section, had already dashed down the road after the daring highwayman.

"It's Jesse James, all right! I would know him anywhere! Pity we hadn't got to the track five minutes sooner," said Davis, as they urged their horses forward.

"I doubt if we could have stopped him, it was done so quick! As it is, we have the lead of the others!"

"Look! There he goes over that fence across Johnson's pasture! What does he mean by going in that direction?"

"He's making for the woods yonder," said the other, as he glanced back over his shoulder. "After him, Davis! There are a dozen men behind us if we need them! If we are going to catch that scoundrel, it is now or never!"

He put his horse, a Mexican mustang, over the fence as he spoke, and his companion did the same, then the two dashed across the pasture together.

The notorious outlaw, with the gold dust across his saddle, was still in plain sight, but going at a pace that made a shot at him impossible, so his two pursuers contented themselves with keeping the distance between them from widening and watching his manœuvres with keen interest.

In spite of the fact that he was going like the wind, the outlaw seemed to be inspecting the herd of cattle that was grazing in the pasture, and as he overtook a bunch of blooded horses he made a detour around them, as though he was determined to improve his opportunity to discover their value.

In doing this he did not materially lessen the distance between himself and his pursuers, and, a moment later, he was out of the pasture and galloping down the road toward the fringe of woods in the distance.

The place was not far from the Saguache River, in Colorado, and the occasion was a horse race between

white men and Indians, the betting which was done with gold dust and nuggets, running, as usual, a little heavy.

The men had deserted the betting ring while the race was on, and the notorious outlaw, who had been mingling with the crowd for some time, improved his opportunity while their backs were turned to shoot the stakeholder, "corral" the dust, and escape, as already detailed.

"Hang the fellow! Does he expect to keep that gait up forever!" muttered Carter, after another five minutes of furious riding.

His companion laughed, and at the same time he unpinned a badge that he had been wearing under the broad collar of his shirt, and slipped it into his inner pocket.

"A wise precaution! Guess I'd better do likewise," remarked his friend, as he observed the act.

Digging their spurs in deeper, the two continued their mad chase, with the yells of the men behind them coming nearer and nearer.

"Look! He's emptying the stuff into his saddle-bags!" exclaimed Davis, as they gained a little on their quarry.

"Gee! That's a clever trick for you! How the deuce can he empty the stuff, going at a gait like that? I'd be willing to bet he won't spill an ounce of it!"

The outlaw had made a sudden spurt ahead and gained a patch of woodland, disappeared like a shot between the trees, and, a minute later, the two detectives pulled up to consult over the situation.

"Hold on, Davis! There are tricks in every trade, old man! Ten to one there's an outlaw behind every one of those trees! You can bet he had some reason for coming in this direction!"

"We'll get a hot reception if we go on; still we can go back, old man! Listen to those fellows behind! They are riding like sticks, and yelling like Comanches!"

"Are your pistols all right?"

"As right as a trivet! Mark that ditch ahead there! That horse of yours looks clumsy!"

"He's good for that, all right, but thunder! What ail those fellows?"

Carter looked back over his shoulder as he spoke, and saw that the group of riders behind had reined up in a bunch and were walking their horses. Then they yelled and gesticulated wildly in their direction.

"It looks like a trick!" said Davis, quickly. "They're as eager to catch Jesse James as we are, and this is only a pretext for gaining time! Come on, Carter! Remember

ber, it means ten thousand dollars from the government if we catch the fellow!"

He pulled the false whiskers from his pocket and clapped them on as he spoke, and once more they both urged their horses forward.

Another chorus of yells from the rear made Carter turn his head, and this time he checked the speed of his horse involuntarily.

"There's some other reason for that racket! Hold on, Davis!" he cried. "They're trying to warn us that there is danger ahead! We'd better go back, and——"

Flash!

Crack!

Bang!

Carter's sentence was cut off in the middle by a bullet, which passed so close to his face that it clipped his mustache.

Like a flash he wheeled his horse around and started back down the road.

Crack!

Bang!

This time the bullet struck him fairly in the chest.

He reeled slightly in the saddle, then recovered himself sufficiently to thrust his hand into his pocket and draw out a small package, which he threw with all his strength toward his companion, Al Davis.

A second later he pitched heavily from his horse, while the package, missing Davis' fingers by a half an inch, fell to the road a few feet from the body.

Davis suppressed a groan of horror and kicked his feet loose from his stirrups, but, as he threw himself over his horse's side, holding by one leg and arm, a voice belled at him from behind a clump of stunted oaks, some forty feet from the roadway:

"Pick that up, and I'll shoot you!"

The voice belonged to Jesse James, and the detective wasted no time in obeying the warning.

He resumed his position in the saddle, noticing at the same time that the group of men behind him were observing the whole transaction, and not moving a muscle to come to his rescue.

"Suspicious of me, I'll bet!" he muttered under his breath; then it suddenly occurred to him how to make good use of their suspicions.

He looked down at the little packet in the road, and did some rapid thinking, all the time wondering what minute

a bullet would come his way, and why it took the outlaw so long to put an end to him.

To leave the packet there where Jesse James could get at it would be fatal, for it contained letters of instruction from Mr. Pinkerton, the head of the noted agency in Chicago, and would prove both his companion's and his own identity.

Another attempt to pick it up would mean the loss of his life, for Jesse James was guarding the spot with his unerring hand on a trigger. And no one knew how many members of his gang were observing the occurrence.

In his dilemma, Davis thought of something that might possibly give him a chance, and, although it galled him to do so, he promptly put it into execution.

He dropped his two weapons in the road, where the outlaw could see them, then threw up both hands, in the act of surrender.

Then facing the clump of trees behind which he knew the outlaw to be hiding, he called out coolly, and with the Western drawl:

"Hold on er minute, Jess! You're wrong in thinkin' we wuz after you! On ther contrary, we wuz only tryin' ter cut loose frum thet thar gang of white-livered cusses yonder! They had ther nerve ter say thet we stole these hyar mustangs! Ez them air papers is only love letters that Bill hyar hez writ ter his gal in Arizony, I'd be obleeged ter yer ef ye'd let me hev 'em, an' no hard feelin's fer shootin' ther boy, tho' I do say as how I'd ruther it 'ud hev been me thet yu popped at!"

He lowered one arm long enough to draw his shirt sleeves across his eyes as he spoke, then put it up again, and awaited the answer to his petition.

The mounted ranchmen, who were looking on, had seen the shooting, but were not near enough by several rods to hear the conversation, and, in the suspense of the present situation, they had ceased their yelling, so there was no one to deny the detective's story.

"Is that a straight yarn, Gray Beard?" asked Jesse James, without showing his head. "Give a little account of yourself before you touch those papers."

"Anythin' at all ter be obleegin', but, for the Lord's sake, don't keep me hyar explainin' 'til them galoots come to their senses! Yer'd orter hev er feller feelin' fer one in my position, Jess James! Howdy think yu'd like ter be ketched yuself, an' strung up fer hoss-stealin'?"

"That isn't likely to happen to me," answered the out-

law, with a laugh. "The man don't live that can draw a bead on Jesse James, but that isn't giving an account of yourself. Who are you, and what are you doing in this section of the country?"

Davis glanced back over his shoulder and lowered his voice, as though he was afraid the ranchmen might hear him.

"I reck'n yu've heard of Bink Bender, now, ain't ye? Waal, I 'm Bink, an' my pal there, ther one yer jest sent to etarnity by the leaden route, is Bill Taylor. Bill mout hev stole ther hosses—'tain't fer me ter say now ther poor chap's dead, but ther thing thet'll interest yer most, Jess, is thet them galoots back thar think we belong ter yer crew, an' they've got an idee this minute thet poor Bill is only playin' possum! I'll bet a tenner now yer couldn't git 'em ter come er rod nearer 'til they wuz sure, that is, ez long as they was suspicious Jess James is lurkin' in ther bushes! Take er look at 'em yerself an' see what they're doin'! Signallin' ther rest of ther push ter surround us, jest ez sure ez shootin'!"

The detective's words had the desired effect, and immediately Jesse James put his head out from between the trees and craned his neck for a glimpse of the ranchmen.

As Davis caught sight of him he grated his teeth and cast a longing look at his two weapons, which still lay in the road where he had dropped them.

Signals, in the shape of shrill whistles, were really growing plentiful now, and Jesse James was not a second in "sizing up" the situation.

"Pick up the papers, but don't touch the pistols!" he commanded, sternly. "Seeing those fellows think you are one of us, you may as well join us for the present. I'll give you back the weapons when I am sure of you, Bink Bender!"

Davis dropped from his saddle and picked up the package; then, slipping it into an inner pocket of his shirt, he promptly remounted.

Whether Jesse James knew that he was lying or not he could not tell. He had played the only card in his hand, and was forced to wait the outlaw's time to see whether he was winner or loser.

Another order from Jesse James made his heart beat a little faster, for three mounted men appeared like magic from behind the trees and bushes.

"See if that fellow is dead, and bring all the weapons!" ordered the outlaw, grimly. "There are two hundred

men over yonder, counting whites and Injuns, so it may be well for us to be quitting this section! We'll take the cut through the woods to Danger City. Once there I can defy the devil himself! Come on, Bink Bender! Let's have a look behind those whiskers and a sample of your horsemanship! Fall a dozen yards behind, and I'll have my men riddle you, and string you up to the first scrub oak by your whiskers! Ha! ha! So your friend might have stole those beasts, might he! Well, there's worse men in the world than horse thieves, stranger!"

As he spoke he reined his horse so close to Davis that by leaning over he could jerk off the false whiskers.

Davis drew a breath of relief as he watched the outlaw's face and saw that he was not familiar with the horse thief's features.

In fact, the long, keen glance into the detective's face told him nothing except that the man who called himself Bink Bender was too young for his reputation, and that he had a pair of eyes as sharp as a ferret's, and a look about his mouth that bespoke grim determination.

The outlaw made no comment, but a cruel smile curved his lips, and, tossing the whiskers in the air, he snatched a knife from his belt and cut them in two cleverly as they were slowly descending.

The next minute they were off like the wind through the piece of woodland, Jesse James setting the pace on his wonderful horse, which he rode with the ease and grace of a Centaur.

CHAPTER III.

A DESPERATE SITUATION.

Al Davis was a detective of wide experience, being one of Pinkerton's best men, but this trial of wits and horsemanship combined was one of the severest tests he had ever been put to, and when the first ten miles of their journey was completed he was almost exhausted.

Nine men in all had sprung up like magic from behind rocks, trees and bushes, but not one of the other eight horsemen could keep up with Fleetwind, the horse which the bandit king was riding.

As he rode along the outlaw became better-natured, and Frank James, his brother, who resembled him in appearance, cracked innumerable jokes at the expense of the "white livered ranchmen," as he called them.

"It's the first time I ever saw so many chicken-hearted

THE JESSE JAMES STORIES.

cusses in a bunch," he said, jovially. "Why, Jess didn't so much as wear a disguise while he was circulating around at the track! He ran plunk into the mayor of Saquache and the constable of Scrub Oak! Both of 'em have been after him a dozen times each, and yet he stole the dust right under their noses!"

"I reck'n they wuz addled from ther pink lemonade," said a fellow by the name of Dan Pitts, who was riding close by Davis. "How wuz it, stranger? You wuz on ther ground, wuzn't ye?"

Davis took the chew of tobacco that the fellow handed him, dropping it purposely as he shifted his position.

"I was there all right, but I wasn't studying the natives," he said, grimly. "My 'tention was give ter ther horses mostly. Thet thar Apache, Black Panther, they call him, was ridin' er beauty! I'd hev give er cool thousand ter hev got my hands on ther critter! I reck'n, now, he was jest comin' home when Jess transacted his biz with Pete Dunstru."

He winked at Pitts as he spoke, and the fellow roared appreciatively.

"Haw! haw! I reck'n now yer right, stranger, an' I 'low Jess warn't ther only one ter take advantage of thet thar excitin' minit! It's er pity I shot yer pal, but it wuz ther cap'n's orders. Yer see, we reckoned yer wuz arter us, an' self-purtection is the fust law of natur', ain't thet so, stranger?"

"I reckon yer right, but I'm sorry ter lose Bill. He was a fust rate feller! Howsomever, I reck'n I kin mosey erlong without him, 'spec'ly now's I'm honored by ther comp'ny of thet thar gent yonder."

He nodded toward Jesse James as he spoke, and then his eyes opened a little wider, for he was just in time to see Jess pull in his horse and raise his hand as a signal for his men to stop instantly.

"Hello! What ther deuce!" muttered Pitts, under his breath. "Ther cap'n smells somethin' an' I 'low it's trouble! It 'ud be mighty uncomfortable ter meet them air ranchers in this hyar bit of country! Thar ain't so much as er scrub oak ter git behind, and as fer——"

"Shut up your mouth, Dan Pitts!" roared Jesse James at that minute. "Hold your noisy tongue or I'll put a wedge between your teeth! Look yonder, Frank! There's a fire ahead! The rascals have cut us off by burning the bridge across the Saquache!"

"It does smell like it," said Frank James, lifting his

head and sniffing. "The wind is this way, and that is surely rotten timber that's burning. Now, how the deuce will we get to Danger City? There isn't a safe ford for ten miles along the river in either direction."

"I'll get to the city to-night, and be hanged to them!" roared the outlaw king, savagely. "It's a clever thing for the whelps to do, though! They mean to force us back toward the Dead Level or east to the Scrub Oak settlement. Well, curse them, I'll do neither!"

"Hold on, Jess! There's no knowin' how many there be! Two hundred men, even if a third of 'em are Injins, ain't no laughin' matter! Where'd we be, I'd like ter know, ef they was ter ketch us in er clearin', and ther ain't nuthin' else twixt hyar and the river!"

The speaker was a rough-looking fellow, who seemed to be the outlaw's right hand man, and before Jess James could reply another member of the gang added his word of caution.

"They're red hot after yer, Jess! Better not dare 'em too far! Thet thar scoop of your'n over at ther minit ain't been forgot yet, and if yer git 'em too mad it may queer ther deal at Danger City!"

"Bah! You're a brace of old women! Shut up you croaking, both of you!" growled the outlaw. "You don't suppose they are such fools as not to divide their force do you? There's the bridge and the settlement and the Dead Level to be manned, and, not counting the Injuns that makes only five to one! It'll take bigger figures than those to make me back water! Besides, there's half a dozen of my men scattered among the ranchers."

Davis had listened to the discussion with a good deal of interest, for now that he had been adopted by the outlaw gang, he knew he must appear to be one of them at least until the time came when he could risk doing differently.

He had not had his weapons restored to him, and even time he saw one of them sticking from the outlaw's belt his fingers fairly itched to close upon it.

He had been sent West to kill Jesse James or capture him alive, and it was not to his taste to be obliged to fight for him; still here was a time when he had no choice and his brain was kept busy devising schemes for his personal safety.

They were crossing a flat piece of country now, which showed only an occasional stunted tree, and here a

there a boulder. 'As Jesse James pointed to the smoke his brother broke in with another discovery.

"Hold on, Jess! There's fresh prints ahead! Three horses have passed this spot within an hour! They've come from the west and made straight for Danger City!"

Every man in the group looked down as he spoke and saw the imprint of horses' hoofs here and there at intervals where the soil was soft and yielding.

"Hang it! What's that to us, so long as they're not in sight!" growled Jesse James. "That smoke is all that's worrying me! It's the bridge all right! Curse the rascals!"

After another minute's thought, however, he decided to make for the Scrub Oak settlement, and wheeled his horse in that direction.

The other men turned with alacrity and followed their leader, but Davis was so stiff from the hard ride that he lagged a little.

The whizz of a bullet by his head, coming from the rear, brought him to his senses, and at the same instant Dan Pitts gave a yell and pitched headlong from his saddle.

Like a flash, every man in the bunch had faced around on his horse, and with the quickness of thought Davis followed their example.

"What the deuce! Halt! Who fired that shot?" roared Jesse James, backing his horse through the group and giving a quick glance at the lifeless body of the robber.

There was no reply to his question, for the men were stupid with bewilderment. There was absolutely no one in sight except their own party, and not a rock, tree or bush that could conceal a human being.

Suddenly Jesse James let his hand fall upon the detective's shoulder, and Davis received a shake that set his teeth to rattling.

"You did it, you whelp! You were behind," he roared. "Admit it, you cur, and give up your weapon!"

Davis attempted to protest, but the outlaw would not listen.

Giving a sharp glance toward the cloud of smoke in the distance, he drew his revolver from his belt and, turning his horse so as to be exactly in front, he aimed it squarely at Davis.

"Search him, Frank! Go through him carefully and see if he is carrying concealed weapons! The whelp

must have shot Pitts, there was no one else to do it!" he said, grimly.

Davis ground his teeth as he thought of his papers, but there was no help for it, so he tried to conduct himself as bravely as possible.

Frank James felt him over, beginning at his boots, and as he found no weapon he shook his head soberly.

"He couldn't have done it, Jess! There ain't a thing on him," he said, decidedly, and just then his hand came in contact with the package of letters.

One of the men had ridden back several paces without finding any weapon, and now Davis straightened himself up and his hand closed over the hand which held Carter's package.

"Hold on, thar! This hyar ain't a squar' deal!" he said, sternly. "Yer've proved I couldn't hev fired ther shot, now what in thunder do yer want with Bill's papers?"

"Let's have 'em, Frank! Hang Bill! 'Twon't hurt him to have us read 'em!" said Jesse James, promptly. "We've got to prove your honesty and we're going to do it! There's nothing against you now, but that deed looks suspicious! How was Pitts shot, I'd like to know, if you didn't do it?"

"Great snakes! I couldn't spit er bullet at him, could I, Jess?" snapped Davis. "And ther Lord knows I hadn't no other way ter kill him! Hev er leetle decency erbout yer ef yer be a robber, Jess James! Yer ain't got no right ter read er dead man's letters! S'pose, now, they'd been writ to yer wife or sweetheart!"

"Bah! Business is business! This ain't the time for sentiment, and, anyhow, sentiment don't become a horse thief! Give me the letters and shut up your mouth! I'll satisfy my curiosity, and you'll do well not to try and stop me! If the letters are what you say you'll have nothing to fear, but if they happen to be anything else, private instructions from headquarters, for instance, why, you can choose your own mode of exit from this world—it won't matter to us how you go, so long as we get rid of you!"

It was the first intimation of his real suspicions that he had given, and as he reached forward for the papers the detective's heart sank like lead; then, with a lightning-like movement, he bent and grabbed the outlaw's own pistol from his hand and, aiming point blank at his heart, let go the trigger.

CHAPTER IV.

A THRILLING RESCUE.

Before the hammer could fall Frank James hit the weapon a blow which sent the bullet intended for the outlaw's heart singing by his ear, and the next instant Davis was grabbed by a dozen hands and jerked from the saddle.

"Lynch him!"

"Riddle ther rascal!"

"Plug him as full of lead as he'll hold!"

"Cut his heart out with a bowie! Curse his impudence! Ther scoundrel tried ter kill ther cap'n!"

These cries were uttered amid a volley of curses and Davis expected nothing more than to be shot down without mercy.

"Hold on! Not so fast, men!" roared Jesse James, who had dropped the papers in his excitement. "That fellow's life is in my hands, and I'll kill him as I please! Here! Put this noose around his ankle and hitch it to Buck Bolton's saddle!"

"Haw! law! Good enough, Jess! Yer goin' ter give him er taste of natur', ain't yer!" bawled another of the gang, as he deftly slipped the lariat that Jesse James had given him around one of the detective's ankles.

"Thet thar beast will jerk him erlong lively, I reck'n, partic'larly ef yer jest tickle his hind legs with ther whip," chuckled Coyote Jim, a swarthy Mexican, as he looked on admiringly.

Buck Bolton sat in his saddle waiting until the order was given to start, and the three members of the gang who were holding Davis down by their united strength looked up at Jesse James curiously.

"I don't mean to kill him yet," said the outlaw, coolly. "I'm going to punish him for being too ambitious. It'll be time enough to finish him when I find out for sure that he——"

"Whoop! Hi, thar, hold on ter yerself, cap'n! Clap yer eye on thet thar an' see ef yer need ter wait any longer! 'Tain't er pop, perzackly, but it's somethin' wuss! It's er sleuth-hound's badge, ez I'm er sinner, an' this hyar cuss is er Pinkerton detective!"

Prairie Pete, the fellow who had gone back to search for the revolver, let out the entire string of words in one breath, and then held the bit of metal that he had found on the ground so that Jesse James could see it.

A volley of curses broke from the outlaw's lips and his face grew white with rage as he motioned for Pete to pick up the papers.

"Pete is right, boys! The fellow is a sneak and an infernal liar!" he roared, as he glanced them over. "His name is either Carter or Davis, and he's out here after me! What do you think of that, boys? His orders are to take me dead or alive! Ha! ha! Well, this looks as if he would do it! But let him up, Bones! I want to hear what he's got to say about it!"

The entire party had forgotten the smoke cloud now, and the thought that the natives of that section might be approaching seemed to have flitted from their minds upon hearing this bit of information.

They stood Davis on his feet with the noose still around his ankle, and, holding a cocked revolver in his hand, Jesse James rode up to him.

"A clever lie! Let me congratulate you!" he sneered. "So you thought you could make a fool of me, did you? Well, that's never been done yet! No man has ever outwitted Jesse James and lived to tell the tale, and it ain't at all likely that you'll be the exception!"

Davis had been badly handled by the men, but he had regained his breath somewhat, and as the outlaw spoke he folded his arms and returned his gaze fearlessly.

"Oh, I don't know, Jesse James! I can mention er few detectives who've hed a leetle ther best of you, I reckon! How erbout thet thar deal at Coyote Gulch, Wyomin'?" asked Davis, not forgetting his assumed drawl.

"Ha! ha! So you was one of the sleuths that did that job, was you? Glad to know it, my friend! It means a couple of extra bullets! Anything else in that line that you want to mention?"

Davis saw the steely glitter in his eyes and knew that he had made a mistake, so he merely shut his teeth together and glared back defiantly.

"Come, now, own up that you were one of those fellows!" said Jesse James, again referring to the paper. "It won't do you any good to lie about it, for you're going to cash in your chips right here and now, and an honest confession is good for the soul—even of a detective."

"I heerd of yer deal at ther Gulch ther same as I've heerd lots of other things," said Davis, glumly. "Yer name ain't loved by no means, Jess, so 'twarnt onnat'ral

fer me ter twit yer on gittin' ther wust on it, was it? Them thar papers belongs ter ther owners of them mustangs thet Bill stole, ef you must hev ther truth on it, but I 'low I wouldn't hev teched ther tarnal things ef I'd er reck'n'd they'd fetch me inter trouble of this hyar natur'!"

Jesse James eyed him sternly while he spoke, and, in spite of his suspicions, the detective's words mollified him a little.

Davis saw his advantage, and went on coolly, without even looking at the others to see how they took the story.

"Ef yer'll be so obleegin as ter look them thar papers over ag'in, Jess, yer'll find a dockymment thet was writ by me an' yer'll 'low 'tain't ther kind of er statement ter trust ter er detective, 'bein' as how they air ther nat'ral enemies ter hoss thieves!"

Jesse James turned over the papers until he found the one mentioned, which was the one Carter had taken from Bink Bender's pocket.

"I haven't any time to read it now," he said, with a quick look at the sky, which was gradually clearing, showing that the last timber of the bridge had burned away.

"We'll just give you a little lift in the way of a free ride, stranger, in the hopes of making you more honest. We've got valuable critters in this lot, as you may have observed, and it's my rule to begin by disciplining my company. You might be tempted to bolt with one of the horses. I've seen you eying Fleetwind ever since we started."

This was a barefaced lie, but Davis kept cool and answered promptly:

"I reckon now it would be goin' ag'in natur' not ter look at thet thar beast, Jess, but Bink Bender ain't no fool! I reckon now he won't try ter steal nothin' frum you, Jess! Yer know it allus takes er rascal ter ketch er rascal!"

"Hurry up, Jess! We're wasting an awful lot of time," warned Frank James at that minute. "Give the fellow his dose, if you think he ought to have it, and then get a move on! Remember, we are in the enemy's country!"

"Where the devil would we go to get out of it, I'd like to know!" roared the outlaw; then he turned and gave an order to Buck Bolton.

"Tie his hands together and let him trail behind your

horse. Start off easy! I don't want to kill the fellow, remember!"

Prairie Pete drew a stout cord from his pocket and tied the detective's hands together, and just for a minute after this was done Davis felt his nerve deserting him, still it was what he had expected, if he ever fell into the outlaw's clutches, for Jesse James was noted for his cruelty.

If there was an ounce of humanity in his make-up, his dealings with men had never shown it, although he was said to treat women with some degree of consideration.

He looked on indifferently now as Buck tightened the lariat by moving a step forward, then once more his eagle glance swept the distant horizon.

Buck's hand descended suddenly upon the flank of his horse, and instantly the beast darted forward, jerking Davis off of his feet, and the other moved away to avoid the bumping body.

Crack!

Once more a pistol shot came from the rear, and this time the leaden missile whistled over the detective's head and ploughed a furrow through the lariat.

Crack!

The strands parted suddenly, being cut as clean by three bullets as a knife could cut it, and in a second Davis was left some forty yards behind his tormentors, who had reached that distance before they could check the speed of their horses.

When they did face around something in the nature of a surprise awaited them, and for a second even Jesse James stared incredulously.

A broken branch of a tree was lying on the ground some distance away, and now it moved and a head appeared under it, then up from a small excavation in the ground bobbed the form of a woman.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" muttered Jesse James, sitting erect in his saddle. "Calamity Jane or her double, by the eternal!"

The woman was not a minute in reaching Davis, who had already lost consciousness and was lying, bleeding and helpless, and as the bandit king approached her she raised her weapon, a brutal looking Colt's revolver, and aimed point blank at him.

"Keep yer distance, Jess James!" she yelled, in a shrill

voice. "I'll put a bullet through yer heart if yer come a step further!"

She took the detective's head in her lap as she spoke and looked down into his face, giving a start of surprise when she saw his features were strange to her.

The next instant a thought sprang into her mind that controlled her actions, and, regardless of the fact that she had never seen Davis before, she decided to save his life, if possible.

"Who are you, old girl? Speak quick!" roared the outlaw, authoritatively.

The woman raised her head and gave him an ugly glance.

"I'm Bink Bender's wife, ef you want ter know!" she said, grimly, then she began wiping the blood and dirt from the detective's face as though she had nothing to fear from the group surrounding her.

Jesse James rode forward until he was close by her side, and for just a minute he had the grace to regret his hasty action.

It was Bink Bender, after all, then, apparently, else why should this woman be in this locality and the one to save him from further punishment.

"How'd he come by these documents?" he asked, showing the woman the papers. "And here's a detective's badge that fell out of his pocket. Can you account for them?"

The woman glanced indifferently at the papers and then leaned over Davis again, saying, in the coolest possible voice:

"I reckon he stole 'em!"

A minute later Davis opened his eyes and stared at her.

The outlaws were holding a consultation among themselves, so the woman had an opportunity to whisper a few words of instruction.

"Keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shet, and I'll save yer, young feller," she said, briefly. "I reck'n now yer belong ter ther sheriff's posse what's after Jess, but 'twon't do ter say so! Yer Bink Bender fer ther present and I'm yer wife! Lord, wouldn't Bink cuss ef he could hear me say it!"

She chuckled in a grim way without making a sound, but as faint and bewildered as Davis was, he seemed to understand perfectly that the woman was befriending him.

Who she was or where she had come from did not

occur to him at that time, and if she had been four times as ugly and old as she was he would still have looked upon her in that first moment of consciousness as an angel of beauty.

But there was no opportunity to express such sentiments now, for a yell from Buck Bolton created immediate consternation.

He had discovered a figure upon the crest of the opposite hill, and the next minute fully fifty mounted men were over the hill and galloping toward them, all yelling like Indians.

Jesse James took one look, then put spurs to his horse and the rest of the gang followed him as he made a dash eastward toward the settlement. This left Davis and the woman to shift for themselves, and Bink Bender's wife drew a breath of relief as she saw what had happened.

"Now, then, young man, you're safe fer ther present, whoever yer be," she said, promptly. "I thought yer was Bink, or I wouldn't er fired. Yer've got thet thar ter thank fer my interference, but yer must shirk fer yerself with ther sheriff yonder!"

Davis ran his fingers between the lining and the outside of his trousers, just under his belt, and extracted a gold piece, which he handed to her.

"Just take me under your wing for a little while longer, madam! My head is whirling like a windmill! I'll pay you well for anything you'll do for me."

"Then do as I say," was the quick reply, and a second later his head was back upon her knee, her revolver was in her pocket, and the two were waiting for what was to follow.

CHAPTER V.

JESSE JAMES AND THE "GYPSIES."

"Go on, boys! After the scoundrels! That is Jesse James ahead; don't let him escape you! Tim and I will stop and see who is waiting for us yonder!"

With these words the sheriff of the county and one of his men drew rein within a few feet of Davis and his companion.

"Now then, talk fast! What's happened?" demanded the sheriff, who was a burly-looking giant. "Was you two waylaid by thet thar cutthroat gang! Who be ye, anyway, and what kin I do fer yer?"

He winked at the woman as he spoke, and Davis was

shrewd enough to see that the wink was meant for a warning.

It meant that the woman was to be careful what she said before his companion.

"Yer right, sheriff! They be cutthroats! They've stole Bob's horse, ther robbers! An' he jest foragin' in-nercent like fer fuel ter build er fire! The rest of our party air yender in ther gulley, an' we're only a band of poor gypsies, on our way ercross Colyrady!"

"Gypsies, hey! Thet thar usually means horse steal-ers," said the sheriff, sternly. "Howsomever, as Jess hez give yer ther devil an' wuss, accordin' ter ther looks of ther youngster, I reck'n I won't detain yer, but git on erbout my biz! Yer sure yer don't want no help ter tote ther chap inter camp, mother?"

There was another wink, and the woman replied, gratefully:

"Ef yer would now, I'd be much obleeged ter yer, sheriff! They tide him ter a mustang and nigh jerked ther life outer him! He's my nevvie, Bob is, and I'm no end proud of him! I reckon he'd er licked 'em, hands down, if ther odds hadn't been ag'in him."

"No doubt erbout it! Haw! haw! I kin jest see him lickin' Jess James and his band o' ruffians! Hyar Tim, hist ther chap aboard an' take him whar she wants him! 'Twon't take er minute ter do her er good turn, and, besides, I'd like ter be sure if they really be gypsies. Anythin' thet don't look right ter yer kin be fixed by er bullet, I reckon!"

The words sounded very severe, but the woman did not look in any way disturbed, and, by this time, Davis was positive that there was some understanding between them, but it was not for him to raise any questions.

A minute later he was in the saddle, with Tim behind him, on the way to the gully, with the woman swinging along with rapid strides beside them.

Tim found nothing in the gully to arouse his suspicions, for all that was visible was a fire and a small bundle of clothing.

There was not a horse in sight, but the woman explained that the two which she owned had probably been led away for water by the other members of the party.

After Tim had gone the scene changed a little, for the woman promptly stamped out the fire and picked up the bundle, and then led the way a hundred yards further down the gully.

Here, in the small clearing under some trees, was another fire, with a young girl of exceeding beauty bending over it, cooking. She raised her head at their steps, and gave Davis such a sympathetic glance that the young man came near losing his heart that very minute.

"Whar'd yer git them duds?" asked the woman as soon as Davis had seated himself by the fire, where he could watch the young girl's labors.

"Traded with a fellow at the track," he answered, promptly. "He gave me that gold piece to boot, as I needed the money."

The young girl looked up quickly, and the woman began to explain, when the third member of the party emerged suddenly from behind the bushes.

He was a man of about middle age, who limped as he walked, and wore one empty coat sleeve, upon which was pinned a paper telling of sundry experiences in battle.

A slouch hat, pulled well down over his eyes, hid the greater part of his face, but there was still enough exposed to show a strong family resemblance to the women.

While they were eating an exceedingly well-cooked supper, Davis made a discovery that verified his suspicions and added considerable to his growing consternation.

Three horses were tethered near them behind clumps of bushes, and, in shifting his position, Davis was able to see one of them clearly, and instantly recognized it as the one Carter had been riding when he was so cleverly tricked by the horse thief, Bink Bender.

This opened a train of reflections that made him very uneasy, but it also explained the woman's actions.

Not one of his three companions knew that Bink was dead. No doubt they thought he was still foraging about the racetrack, on a lay for more horses, and they were planning to meet him farther back in the mountains.

A conversation that took place soon after the meal was ended convinced him he was right, and added the last straw toward unsettling his conscience.

He had no objections to shooting a horse thief when he knew that said thief had just murdered in cold blood one of his dearest friends, but it was another thing to shoot the husband of a woman who had saved his life, or the father of a girl who was beginning to fascinate him.

Mrs. Bender asked him a question over twice just at this point in his reflections, and, pulling himself together with a jerk, Davis tried to answer.

"What was I doing with Jesse James? Well, I hardly know," he began, absently. "I'm a tenderfoot in this section, and my friend, Carter, and myself, were looking on at the races when Jess shot the stakeholder and bolted with the dust! Every one else put after him, so, of course, we went, too, and, not knowing his tricks, we kept on when the others warned us. He shot my friend dead in his saddle, and then took me along with him. If I had refused he'd have sent a bullet through my heart, and, as it was, they tied me to a mustang and attempted to wipe up the country with me. Thanks to this wonderful woman, I live to tell the story!"

"Ma is wonderful! She is the best shot in the country, next to Jesse James," said the girl, quickly.

"She saved my life," said the detective, rather soberly, for he was wondering all the time what she would do if she knew who murdered her horse-thief husband.

He could understand the woman's silence in regard to her husband, for, of course, she did not wish him to know Bink Bender's profession, and Davis was only too glad to let her think that he believed them to be a band of gypsies, inasmuch as it would obviate the necessity for conversation upon a painful subject.

"I do hope the sheriff catches Jesse James, but he won't!" said the young girl, again casting a shy glance at Davis. "There are no end of detectives sent out here to catch him, but he murders every one of them, and tortures them terribly."

"Hem! That's cheerful!" muttered Davis, under his breath, then a shiver crept up his spine as he recalled his taste of the torture.

"I can't think what's keepin' Bink," said the woman, scowling. "Somethin' must hev happened!"

"He 'low'd he'd jine us by sunset," said the man, glancing up through the trees. "It's past that now, an' thar ain't a sign of him."

"We'd better be a gittin' on toward ther hills, Cunnel," said the woman, soberly. "Ther Blue Cut Cave'll hold us, hosses an' all, an' it's ther place Bink'll make fer fust, ef he don't find us in ther gully."

"I reck'n we'll hev ter double up, Mag," remarked the man again. "Three critters won't do for four on us, not fer any distance. Ef Bink would only come now it's possible he'd——"

"Sh! Ther's some one comin'! It may be Bink!" cried the woman, softly. "What's he steppin' so light

fer, do yer s'pose? Yer don't reck'n he kin scent er stranger, do yer?"

"It isn't dad—I'm sure it isn't!" said the young girl, quickly. "Wait! I'll give him the signal; that will tell us who it is, but, anyway, there's nothing to fear! No one, even in Colorado, would harm a band of poor gypsies!"

She gave a low, sweet whistle as she finished speaking, and in less than a minute the signal was answered.

"It's dad!" she exclaimed, with no especial show of pleasure, and Davis felt his hair beginning to stand on end at such an unpleasant suggestion.

"We mout as well be startin' then! Hullo, Bink! What kept you so long?" cried out the woman, as she started toward the horses.

A crackling in the bushes was followed by the appearance of a man's head, and then a face that was no more like Bink's than black is like white, loomed up over the bushes and looked at them.

"I'll be hanged! It isn't Bink arter all!" muttered the one-armed man, nervously. "Hullo, stranger! A purty way thet thar ter skeer honest people! What's ther matter with walkin' above ground like er man, an' not skulkin' in ther bushes?" he continued.

Davis was studying the newcomer's face as best he could in the fading light of the gully, but, although there was something familiar about it, he was obliged to admit that he was baffled.

"Cussed ef I didn't think you was a gang of bandits," remarked the man, in a husky voice, as he stalked boldly toward the party. "I'm travelin' alone, as you see, and I've lost my horse. He dropped under me an hour ago, after a forty-mile run over these blarsted hills, and it behooves a man to be a leetle bit keerful afore trustin' himself in the company of strangers!"

"I reckon now ther risk is erbout even, strenger," retorted the one-armed man, dryly. "Howsomever, bein' as how yer've dropped in on us, as yer mout say, we make yer welcome. We're only a band of poor gypsies trailin' erlong ercross Colyrady."

"Got a horse to spare?" asked the newcomer, dropping down upon the ground within ten feet of Davis, and putting his back against a tree.

"Naw, we ain't! We've got er man ter spare," was the crusty answer. "I'm too lame ter hoof it, an' ther women air women, so I reckon you an'——"

"Bob can ride with Peggy!" broke in the woman, sharply. "There ain't no reason why he should walk, cunnel! Thet thar mustang kin carry 'em both jest as easy as anythin'!"

"Then, I reckon I might just as well have gone on," said the stranger, laughing. "Which way'd you say you—you gypsies was goin'?"

Davis had a chance to give the one-armed man a significant look just then, and, as the old fellow was taken with a coughing fit, he took it upon himself to answer.

"We're goin' ter Danger City, ef yer wants ter know, stranger," he said, curtly. "Ther's er chance fer trade over there, an' we need it, yer kin gamble! Fortun' tellin' is slow in this hyar section of ther country!"

As the stranger rose from the ground Davis had an opportunity to study him closer.

He was a tall, finely-developed man of thirty or thereabouts, dressed in the regulation garb worn by cowboys of that section, but his face was as dark as an Indian's for some reason or other, and a hideous scar across one cheek distorted his expression. Whether the scar was genuine or not the detective could not tell, but there was something in its ghastliness that made him a trifle suspicious.

As he continued to observe him, the truth suddenly dawned on the detective.

The newcomer was Jesse James—there was no mistake about it, yet he felt sure that he was the only one of the party that had guessed his identity, and he was also the only one of the four who was at present without a weapon.

What was he there for, and how had he evaded the sheriff's posse?

These were questions which Davis asked himself, but could not answer.

It was only another demonstration of the famous outlaw's ability.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DETECTIVE UNDER SUSPICION.

Suddenly the detective sprang to his feet with a lightning-like motion.

In a second Jesse James whipped a revolver from his belt.

"Sit down! You'll do better sittin' than standin', young man! Now, then, if one of you moves a muscle I'll put a bullet through you! Ha! ha! So you're only a band of gypsies, are you?"

It was done so quickly that no one had time to even wink, and for just a second the outlaw was master of the situation.

The one-armed man had two pistols in his belt, but he could not draw them, and the woman's revolver was lying at the bottom of her pocket.

"Now, then, throw up your hands, young fellow!" went on the outlaw, savagely. "Put 'em up high, so I can see 'em, for it's growing dark! You can put the one you've got left over your head, too, Colonel Bender! I won't be hard on an old soldier, even if he is a horse thief. Now, then, bright eyes, just bring them horses here, will you? Mind you, bring 'em quick, and no treachery, my girl! If I'm as bad as you say, you must know I'm not the man to be trifled with!"

"Indeed, I know you now! You are Jesse James!" cried the young girl, hotly. "I would kill you if I could!"

Her eyes flashed fire as she spoke, and her cheeks blazed with passion, and as Davis gazed at her he was spellbound with admiration.

Such courage and spirit were rarely seen in a young girl, and it was plain that the outlaw regarded her with some wonder.

"Snakes! But you've got grit! Ha! ha! Too bad I'm not a young fellow on the lookout for a wife! But enough of this! It is growing dark, bright eyes! Bring the horses here, I want a look at them! If you refuse, I'll empty three chambers of my weapon and you'll be the sole surviving member of your family!"

Margaret did not tarry after that, but darted after the horses, and had just led out Carter's mustang when a rifle shot echoed down the gully. Another and another followed, and Jesse James looked like a statue, his ears strained in the direction of the shots, but with his finger still upon the trigger and his glances flashing like lightning from one to the other of his "quarry."

"It's Bink!" cried the woman, sharply, hoping to alarm the outlaw, but only a contemptuous smile curved his cruel lips as he answered, shortly:

"Bah! Bink Bender is dead! No danger of his coming! Guess again, old woman, and keep your hand out of your pocket!"

The snap of a trigger followed the last remark, and a bullet passed through the sleeve of the woman's dress as she was lowering her arm stealthily.

The woman did not dare to make another attempt to draw her pistol, and the old man had collapsed completely.

Margaret had led the mustang close to the outlaw's side, and was now having all she could do to calm the vicious creature, for the reports of the pistols had excited it greatly.

What would happen next no one could tell, and for Davis, at least, it was an exciting moment.

He would have given his all to have had one of the one-armed man's useless weapons within reach, still he knew that any movement of his, however slight, would probably bring a bullet in his direction.

Crack! bang! went the revolvers of the band of horsemen just above them in the gully, then the hoarse shouts

of the riders were wafted to their ears, not plainly enough for them to identify the voices, but sufficiently clear to show that they were coming nearer.

With a quick motion the outlaw raised his hand, and at the same instant Davis dropped to the ground, where he lay as motionless as though the breath of life had left him.

The outlaw's bullet passed just far enough above his prostrate body to have hit him squarely in the heart had he remained in his original position.

Margaret uttered a shriek of alarm and let go of the bridle, and, as the fiery mustang darted away, the outlaw gained his back with a bound, and disappeared down the gully, with the woman emptying her revolver after him, but doing no damage.

Margaret recovered herself instantly, and knelt at the young man's side, only to find, to her great joy, that he was entirely uninjured.

"Never touched me, Miss Margaret!" he exclaimed, jovially. "My lucky star must have been with me that time!"

"You think he is after you, don't you, Mr. —," began the girl, timidly.

"My name is Davis. Al Davis, from Chicago," said the detective, promptly. "Yes, I knew he was after me, and I was waiting for that bullet! I dropped just in the nick of time! It isn't always that I am so lucky."

He rose to his feet as he spoke and took a look around, giving a sigh of relief that one more danger had been passed safely.

Without waiting to consult her mother, who was busily reloading her weapon, she tore the two pistols from the old man's belt, and handed them to Davis.

"Now, then, the belt, please!" said the detective, feeling like a man once more. "And in future, Miss Margaret, please do not fear to trust me! Remember I owe my life to your mother, and I am not likely to forget it!"

"I do trust you, sir, even though I know not your errand here," was the soft reply, and a moment later the one-armed coward was stripped of his belt and the detective was girdled with it.

Not another sound had been heard from the posse, although five minutes had passed, and they had about concluded that it had taken a course on the brow of the hill and on across the country to the west, when suddenly a shout from some one up the gully came to them.

Davis put his hands to his mouth and answered the shout, and a minute later they could hear the crackling of horses in the bushes.

"Whoop! Hi thar! Where are ye, stranger?" yelled the voice again. "Speak out! We ain't huntin' fer honest people! Hez any one seen ther tracks of er thoroughbred in this hyar section of country?"

"He's looking for Jesse James! It's Fleetwind that he means!" said Davis, quickly, and then yelled back an answer.

The woman tried to stop him, and then checked the words upon her lips, and as Davis gave her a surprised glance, he suddenly understood her consternation.

But the deed was done, and the men were coming. They were so near now that their voices could be heard, but it had grown so dark that their outlines were not yet visible.

"Oh, I hope it is the sheriff!" cried Margaret, sharply. "If it is, we are safe, for, of course, he is after Jesse James, but——"

"Hush!"

Her mother stopped her with a word, while the old man hobbled to his feet and tried to assume his natural bearing.

"Is the sheriff your friend—that is, is he a friend to gypsies?" asked Davis, quickly.

"Bink and the sheriff wuz fust cousins," answered the woman, grimly. "You saw Bink at ther track, stranger, so yer know he ain't dead, don't yer?" she continued, with a keen glance. "There, Jesse James wuz er lyn', an' now, ef this hyar is ther sheriff, thar ain't nothin' ter fear, but if——"

"Hullo! Hyar ye be! Who ther devil be ye?" roared a voice at that minute, and two horses crashed through a fringe of brush and broke into the clearing.

Margaret gave a little cry, which was promptly checked by her mother, and just then one of the men appeared to recognize the woman.

"By ther eternal! Ef it ain't Bink Bender's woman!" he cried, lustily. "Jumpin' sandhills! What luck! Now, then, ther hull bunch of ye throw up yer hands! We're after Queen Bess, Commodore Stetson's thoroughbred, and the man what stole her, and, by thunder! we've found the horse."

His companion was leading out one of the horses that Davis had only seen at a distance, and, as he got a close look at the magnificent animal, he understood the whole situation.

Bink Bender had stolen this horse, as well as Carter's, and these men were not of the sheriff's posse, but sturdy representatives of Commodore Stetson's own stables.

"As I said," continued the sheriff, "we're after ther cuss thet stole ther horse, an' as t'other sample of ther maskuline gender don't look capable of stealin' nothin', I reck'n as how you air ther man we're after!"

Margaret gave a cry at this, but her mother promptly clapped her hand over her mouth, and began glaring at the detective with the ferocity of a tiger.

"Yer right, I'm Mag Bender," she yelled, in a shrill voice, "but as yer don't want nothin' of me, I'll get er

move on, and obleeged ter yer! Thet thar will leave yer ter settle yer diff'rences with no witnesses, stranger! Come, Peggy! Thar's one beast left! Thar can't no one claim Black Denny!"

She grabbed the girl by the shoulder as she spoke, and fairly dragged her toward the last horse, with the one-armed man yelling at her not to leave him unprotected.

"I'll not go a step, mother! Father did steal the horse, and you know it!" cried Margaret, stoutly.

A blow squarely across the girl's face cut off her cries, and, with a muttered curse, Davis started forward, only to be stopped by the click of a trigger.

"Hold on, you two! Not so fast!" said the other rider, who had halted the one-armed man in the same way.

The next minute Black Denny thundered out of the brush, with the two women on his back, leaving Davis and the quaking "colonel" to make explanations.

Jesse James had not been so far amiss in naming the old woman. She was indeed a creature of viciousness and fire, yet she had proved herself capable of heroic deeds, and in this she was not unlike the notorious outlaw himself, so it was not surprising that he understood her.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DETECTIVE MEETS A CHUM.

"Now, then, what hev yer got ter say Whar'd yer git thet thar hoss?" asked one of the men, drawing a bead on Davis.

The detective did some rapid thinking, and decided to tell the truth, but, just at that minute, he remembered that Jesse James had his papers, so there was no way of proving the truth of his statements.

"Talk fast!" growled the man, bending a little lower in his saddle and looking at him sharply. "Of course, ye'll lie; it's only nat'ral yer should, but— Hello! If it ain't Al Davis!"

The sudden change in his voice took the detective completely by surprise, and the next minute the two were shaking hands and exchanging words of greeting.

"By Jove! You are out of sight in those duds, Ray!" cried Davis. "I wouldn't have known you in a thousand years! You look like a native, and your lingo is perfect!"

"It ought to be! I've been practicing for six weeks," laughed the other, as he slipped from the saddle. "I've been staying at the commodore's ranch getting acquainted with the country and, as this is the biggest 'lay' I've been on since I came, I'm glad I'm successful, but where the deuce did you come from, and what are you doing here? I thought you were after Jesse James and I find you hobnobbing with horse thieves!"

Davis explained what had befallen his friends, Carter and Williams, and his companion, Raymonde Hall, who was a detective from the same agency, ground his teeth over the story of Jesse James and his villainies.

"Mr. Pinkerton told me to keep my eye peeled for the rascal while I was out in this section," he said, as he introduced Davis to his companion, who was the commodore's head stableman, "but I've been so busy hunting horse thieves that I have not thought much about him, and, from what you tell me, I think I'd as soon not meet him."

"He's a hard nut to crack, but what are we going to do with this big baby?" asked Davis, pointing to the one-armed man who was skulking behind one of the horses.

"Let him go! He's a crackbrained brother of Bender's," said the stableman, who had been inspecting him. "He's too big a fool to do any damage, but wouldn't it be a good idea to change clothes with him, Mr. Davis?"

"Seeing I've played horse thief long enough, I think it would," said Davis, catching hold of the fellow, and in a few minutes the change was effected.

"Now, then, you play a lone hand for the rest of this game," laughed Hall. "It may be inconvenient, but it may lead to some surprises. Nobody in this section will dream of that idiot pulling a trigger!"

"Then get out, Colonel Bender! The country is wide and I wish you luck," said Davis, turning on his heel, and without any ado the old fellow limped away.

"Jesse James has a deal on to-night in Danger City," went on Davis, as he sprang onto the bare back of the thoroughbred, after getting possession of the bridle. "I did not learn what it was, but I fancy the sheriff has queered it, all right. They've burned down the bridge across the Saquache and the sheriff and half the men in the county are looking for Jess. He stole the stakes at the races to-day, and they're bound to get them back."

"Ha! ha! It takes a rogue to catch a rogue! So Sheriff Wilkinson is on the track of Jesse James, is he? That is rich, old man!" roared Hall, delightedly. He sprang back into the saddle as he spoke, and Davis turned for explanations.

"What's the matter with the sheriff? I had a suspicion that he was shady from what Mrs. Bender told me," he said, anxiously.

Hall and the stableman both laughed, and then, as they reached a wider roadway, Hall enlightened him a little.

"Wilkinson is as big a rascal as the county holds, Davis! The only man whose record is worse is Jesse James, and you can't set Jess down to any county or country. There's nothing in the shape of rascality that the sheriff isn't into, and the reason he hates Jess is be-

cause the outlaw always gets the best of him! Bink Bender is a sucking babe in comparison with the sheriff!"

"I judged as much from what the old dame said. Well, Bink has gone to his last account," said Davis, soberly. "I shot the fellow myself, after he swore he'd killed Williams!"

"Gee! That's bad for you Davis! Better not let the sheriff hear of it!" exclaimed Hall, with a whistle. "As you understand it, the sheriff is stocking up a farm over in Danger City, and he depended on Bink to supply him with horses cheap! That's where Queen Bess was headed for, no mistake about it!"

"Where are you going now?" asked Davis, as they reached a fork in the gully road and Hall suddenly veered to the left.

"Back to the ranch with the thoroughbred. The commodore will be delighted to get her in the stable again. She's been gone a week and he's just had a good bid for her."

"How far is it to the ranch?"

"Only about four miles. Just an easy ride for the shank of the evening."

"Hold on, Hall! I've got a scheme!" said Davis, drawing rein suddenly. "Did you get a look at that young girl, old Mag Bender's daughter!"

"I saw there was a girl, but I didn't look at her. Why, what's the matter, old man—not smitten, are you?"

"She's the prettiest girl I ever saw, and as good as she is pretty, if I am any judge," was the quick answer.

"Well, what is it, old man? What can I do?" asked Hall, turning in his saddle.

"Do you know where the Blue Cut Cave is?" asked Davis, quickly.

Hall turned to the stableman, who nodded his head affirmatively.

"It's three miles to the right. A lonely spot," he said, promptly. "It 'ud be as much as yer life was wuth to go here at night, gentlemen. The cave mout be called a rendezvoo fer cutthroats."

"Then, you'll excuse me, Davis! I'd rather go back to the ranch!" laughed Hall.

"But think of the girl! A nice place for a seventeen-year-old female to be! Say, Hall, you ought to see her!"

"That settles it. No man shall say that Raymonde Hall is not chivalrous! But what's the matter with Mag Bender?"

"Bah! She's the very one that the child should be protected from," said Davis, sharply. "The woman is as much of a horse thief at heart as her husband! What a life for a girl! We must save her, Raymonde!"

Hall wheeled his horse around promptly and started off on the other path, with the stableman following his lead, and a smile of pleasure lighted Al Davis' features.

The girl had fascinated him as well by her courage as her wonderful beauty, and the blood tingled in his veins as he thought of seeing her again.

After five minutes of riding the stableman took the lead, and they soon entered a fringe of woods that was as dark as a pocket.

"It isn't likely we'll meet any one but the women," said Davis, after a brief silence, "but Mrs. Bender is a splendid shot, one of the best in the country. We'll have to manage some way not to let her get a bead on us!"

"Better ride with your pistol in your hand, then," said Hall, and it was a most fortunate thing for them all that he gave the warning.

Half way through the woods the first horse shied violently, and as he reared and sprang to one side a bullet whistled past the stableman's ear, and at the same time the three riders seemed to be surrounded by horsemen.

They came from all sides, as though they had been crouching behind the trees and bushes, and as Davis peered around he counted at least a dozen.

"Halt! Who comes hyar!" roared a voice that they all recognized at once as belonging to the sheriff.

The stableman was ahead, so he answered the question, reining his horse in at the same time and cocking his weapon.

"'Taint none of yer bizness who we air, but as we're honest men we don't mind tellin' ye, sheriff! We're from Commodore Stetson's stables—thet is, two on us air; ther feller in ther rear is our prisoner, at present!"

"What's he done?" asked the sheriff, pressing forward and trying to get a good look at Davis.

"We dunno yet!" was the prompt answer. "Thet thar critter he is ridin' is Queen Bess, one of ther commodore's thoroughbreds. She's been missin' fer a week, and when we found her back hyar in the gully, this feller was with her."

"Queen Bess! Is that Queen Bess?" asked the sheriff, and the men could easily detect the note of disappointment in his tones.

"Thet thar's Queen Bess herself! Now, then, if we could just clap an eye on Bink Bender, I reckon we'd hev ther cuss who stole her," said Hall, quickly.

"Then thet air rooster ain't Bender!" said the sheriff, trying to squeeze past Hall in order to get a closer look at Davis.

"Yer know well enough 'tain't Bink," said Hall, keeping his horse directly in his path. "Bink got away and so did Mag and the gal! This old duffer was the only thing in sight when we struck ther gully."

"Whar air yer takin' him to?" asked the sheriff, in a stiffer tone. "This hyar ain't ther way ter ther commodore's ranch. Give an account of yerselves if yer expect me ter swaller yer story."

"Swaller it or not, as yer like," said Hall, sharply. "You git er move on, sheriff, an' go about yer bizness! Jess James and his gang need a leetle of your attention, while we kin attend ter our own affairs, I reck'n."

A grunt from the other men showed that his remarks were resented, and as the stableman attempted to move forward there was the click of a dozen hammers.

"Hold on, thar! Not so fast! It's Jess James thet we're after!" retorted the sheriff, promptly. "Who's ter say you two ain't members of his gang, I'd like ter know! Take a good look at 'em, men, and see if you know 'em! As like as not, you air the very rascals we're after! Yer've stole ther thoroughbred from Bink Bender an' it's my duty as sheriff ter restore ther critter!"

"Ha! ha! That's good, sheriff! Kinder late ter see ther critter slip thro' yer fingers, don't yer? Waal, let me say right hyar, Queen Bess ain't bound fer Danger City nor Squire Wilkinson's stock farm, not ter-night, at any rate! You'll hev ter git her stole ag'in, sheriff, afore yer corral ther critter!"

A howl of rage from the sheriff followed this plain speech, and Davis held his breath to see what would happen.

"Curse you! Who be you, anyhow, thet yer dare ter insult ther highest official in ther county?" roared the sheriff. "Put up per hands! I'll l'arn yer a lesson in manners. Put up yer hands, I say, or I'll blow yer ter blazes!"

Crack!

A bullet sped from Davis' coat pocket where the empty sleeve was confined, and passing through the sheriff's right arm made him let out a howl of agony.

At the same time Hall pulled a trigger with both hands, firing in two directions, and the stableman let loose a shower of bullets from the muzzle of a forty-two calibre Colt's revolver.

The sheriff's men were surprised at the sudden action, and as the thoroughbred suddenly dashed ahead, nearly upsetting the horse that the sheriff was riding, they began blazing away in every direction.

"It's Jess, sure!" roared the sheriff. "After him, men! Mag Bender told me he was after the horse! Let go at him, fellows! Plug him full of bullets!"

Whether he really thought it was Jesse James or not, the detectives could not tell, but for the next minute bullets flew at short range, and there was a tremendous amount of swearing and yelling.

It was too dark to see each other's faces ten paces away, and in less time than it takes to count ten the combatants were so mixed up that no one dared to take aim for fear of hitting the wrong fellows.

The sole object of the scrimmage seemed directed to one end: The sheriff's posse were trying to make Queen

Bess break away from the rest, so they would have opportunity to chase and capture her.

Believing Davis to be the cowardly Colonel, they knew this could be easily done, but the detective, through their game and was careful not to separate himself from the group until he could do so with a degree of safety.

This opportunity arrived when the horses began rearing and prancing in their efforts to pass each other, and their riders leaned from the saddle trying to see the other's faces.

Hall saw a chance to forge ahead, and did so, and his horse skyrocket, while Davis made a sudden dash and disappeared between him and the stableman.

In another minute they were all three off like the wind, and, their horses, being fresh, they soon outdistanced the sheriff's posse, which had been out for hours and was nearly exhausted.

"A close shave! Darkness was all that saved us," said Hall, as he slowed up half a mile beyond the scene of the encounter.

"They've gone back! Their horses are played out."

Hall laughed, and then he and the stableman rode on sulked together. The man had a scratch on his arm, but it was bleeding profusely, but he tied a handkerchief around it, as though it did not matter.

"We've got out of our way a little! The cave is farther to the west. Suppose we take a short cut," he suggested, peering about. "It'll be moonlight in an hour, and by that sides, we'll be out of the woods by then. There's no moon but rocks in the vicinity of the Blue Cut."

After they had ridden a while in silence, Hall suddenly claimed:

"I can see the Blue Ledge ahead, so it's not far to the cut."

"Sh! There's some one ahead! Hold up a minute," ordered the stableman, sharply. "Look there to the right, under that bunch of cedars! Hanged if it ain't Jesse James himself! I'd know him if it was blacker than pitch and——"

"Halt!"

The outlaw bellowed the word like a blast from a trumpet.

"Not a step farther, or you are a dead man, Sheriff Wilkinson!"

"Well, I'll be hanged! Here's a pretty mix up," muttered Hall, under his breath. "First we are held up by the sheriff, who thinks we are Jesse James, and then we are called to order by Jess, who takes us for——"

Crack!

A pistol spoke at that minute, and ended the sentence, and at the same instant a bullet whistled so close to Hall's ear that it made him shudder.

"Curse you! Halt, I say! Come another step and I'll blow out your brains!" roared the outlaw again, and, at the same time, the moon sailed majestically above the hills, showing the outlines of three horsemen blocking their path completely.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DETECTIVE'S CONFESSION.

Davis gripped his weapon a little tighter when he made out the form of Jesse James, and, for a moment, he could hardly restrain his impatience to dash forward and make a shot at him.

"Go easy, Davis," warned Hall, as if he had read his mind. "There's no knowing how many men he has with him! They're likely to spring up like mushrooms, and we wouldn't be one, two, three in the game! Better use diplomacy, I think, old fellow."

"I'd rather use bullets!" muttered Davis, as he saw the three outlaws drawing gradually nearer.

Hall chuckled a little, and then stuck his revolver in his belt, and, changing his voice back to that of a native, he called out, coolly:

"Hello, Jess! Yer mistaken in us, pard! We ain't the sheriff's gang! We're jess peaceable citizens, on er peaceable errand. We've lost er critter, an' air lookin' fer her!"

"Where are you from?" asked the outlaw, in a more civil tone. "Just put up your hands while you answer, will you? It'll give me more confidence in your story, stranger!"

Hall threw up both hands obediently, and, guiding his horse with his knees, he moved on to meet the outlaw.

"Great snakes, Jess! This hyar ain't no way ter treat honest men!" he began. "We wouldn't ask you ter hold up yer hands, tho' ther Lord knows we'd be justified in doin' even wuss by yer! We seen yer in time ter hev gone back ef we'd hed anythin' ter fear, so it's only fair thet yer'd be more considerate in yer dealin's."

"What's your name?" asked the outlaw, as soon as he had finished his remarks.

"Coon Tilley! I reckon yer've heerd of Coon, ain't ye, Jess? Now, then, yer kin shoot and be hanged! I ain't er goin' ter hold my arms up no longer!"

He dropped his arms as he spoke, and the outlaw's pistol snapped warningly, but it was only over an empty chamber, so it did no damage.

"Yer ain't seen nuthin' of er roan mare with one white fore foot now, hev yer, Jess?" went on the detective, rapidly. "We've lost sech a critter from Commodore Stetson's stable, an' as she was a winner at ther track ter-day we hate——"

He was interrupted at this point by Frank James, who rode up behind his brother, and said:

"There's some one signaling off to our right, Jess! They're waving a torch," he muttered. "Better send Buck ahead to look into it, hadn't we?"

Jesse James did not even glance over his shoulder, but took his brother's statement without investigation.

"Get ahead and see what's to pay, Buck!"

Buck Bolton dashed ahead and disappeared over the edge of a knoll, and the two detectives glanced up to see if they could make out the signal.

Just beyond the gentle knoll was a rugged hill, surmounted with a mass of gigantic boulders, and at the base of these rocks a torch was being waved, although at first glance it glowed no brighter than a candle.

Several minutes passed before they heard again from Bolton.

Then a series of short whistles came over the hills, and once more the torch glowed, this time as bright as a bonfire.

"Where'd yer say yer was goin', Jess?" asked Hall, who had kept up a one-sided conversation.

"That depends on what Buck has to say when he comes back," answered the outlaw, grimly, and without changing his position.

"Waal, if thet thar's ther case, we'll hev ter part company," said Hall, making a feint to start back.

"Hold on! Not so fast! Tain't often we meet such agreeable companions!" replied the outlaw, promptly. "You just stay as you are for the present, Coon Tilly! Move a hand to draw a weapon and I'll put a bullet through you!"

"Yer will, will yer!" roared Hall, with a lightning-like movement.

Crack went his pistol, but Jesse James slid from his horse's back that instant, and the bullet went over his head.

The next second Hall fell from his saddle with a bullet in his neck, and the stable-man and Jesse James were making targets of each other's bodies.

In the same instant Davis wheeled on his horse, sending bullets from two revolvers into the body of an outlaw who had sneaked behind him.

As Frank James pitched from his horse, Davis felt a twinge of pain in his arm, but he dashed off like the wind and was soon some distance from the scene of action.

Pausing on the top of the knoll, he glanced back over his shoulder, but there was no sound of any one pursuing, so he sat down for a minute and examined his injury.

The ball had passed through the arm, leaving a cleanfyt-cut hole, but, as no blood vessel of any size had been severed, the wound did not alarm him. Taking the end of the lariat from the bridle where it still dangled, he

tied it tightly above the spot and, thus stopping the flow of blood, he rode on slowly.

That Hall was dead seemed a foregone conclusion, and Davis was bemoaning his fate sincerely when he heard a horse galloping in the distance.

He sprang from his saddle and hid himself behind a tree, making the horse lie down beside him in the hope of its being overlooked in the darkness.

The hoofbeats came faster and faster and were rapidly approaching the tree when it suddenly occurred to Davis that they were coming from another direction, and, in a minute more, he made out the outlines of a powerful horse and saw that its rider was none other than Margaret Bender.

Like a flash he was in the saddle and out into the path just in time to frighten the girl's horse and make it shy violently.

With a cry of alarm, Margaret let go of the bridle, and the next minute Davis dropped from his horse and held out his arms.

He was in time to receive the form of the beautiful girl, and the next he knew he was folding her to his breast and looking down into her face.

He was so happy at seeing Margaret again, and so alarmed for fear that she was hurt that for the time being everything but her face seemed to vanish from his mind.

As she hung limp in his arms, he could not resist the temptation to kiss her—once, thrice, when she suddenly opened her eyes and, finding Davis bending over her, she uttered a little cry of astonishment.

"Don't be frightened! I'm sorry I frightened you!" began the detective, eagerly. "I was off just in time to catch you, though. Please say you are not hurt. I should be very sorry if I had injured you!"

"I am not hurt, only startled!" was the answer, as the young girl tried to raise her head from his shoulder. "Please get my horse, Mr.—Mr. Davis! Mother is waving the torch, and I must get to her immediately!"

"What does the signal mean?" asked Davis, tightening his hold of her waist, and then calling to the horses, which had stopped nearby.

"I—I must not tell! It's a signal between the gypsies," began the girl, but Davis interrupted her.

"You told me you would trust me, Margaret," he said, reproachfully. "The signal is intended for the sheriff, isn't it? Your mother is waving the torch to tell him something."

The girl hid her face behind her hands for a minute, then taking them away, she looked up at him honestly.

"Yes, that is it," she whispered, sharply. "I will tell you, Mr. Davis! It is to let the sheriff know that the thoroughbred has been stolen. She knows if she doesn't

get Queen Bess back for the sheriff father will treat her terribly!"

"But he can't! He is dead!" cried Davis, impulsively. "She has nothing to fear from him, and surely Wilkinson will not harm her."

"She doesn't believe that father is dead, and neither do I," said the girl, sadly. "We have heard that news so often that we pay no attention to it now. Sometimes he is gone for weeks, but he always comes back, and usually with a lot of horses that he has stolen."

"What a life for you, Margaret," whispered Davis, as the girl finally succeeded in releasing herself from his arms.

He stood looking down at her now with his heart in his eyes, and at his words the girl suddenly broke out in a fit of weeping.

"It is dreadful! Dreadful! I hate it!" she cried, hotly. "But what am I to do? I am the daughter of a horse thief! They have not even dared to send me to school because of that stigma! Oh, I would give the world to get away from it all, yet here I must live and die—because they are my parents!"

Her head drooped again, and Davis, putting his arms about her, whispered ardently in her ear: "You shall not live and die here, sweetheart! You shall come with me! I fell in love with you the minute I saw you! You must marry me, Margaret, and go back with me to Chicago!"

The girl raised her head once more and looked into his eyes, and this time she did not draw away from him.

"Before you promise to marry me, Margaret, I have something to say," he began, rapidly. "I can't say I love you without saying something else and that is that it was I who shot Bink Bender, your father!"

CHAPTER IX.

A NIGHT OF CRIME.

Margaret hardly breathed for a minute after Davis made this announcement, and for fear that she would be horrified at his act, the young man hurried with his explanations.

"He stole my horse and then assured me that he had killed my friend Williams with his own hand, so what was I to do? Of course I did not give it a thought until I saw you, darling, but, since then I have regretted my deed sincerely."

The young girl set her teeth hard and her breath came fast, but she finally raised her head and said, in a steady voice:

"He deserved it, Mr. Davis! No, I do not blame you. I'm sorry to say father was a bad man."

Once more her head fell forward and Davis took her in his arms and kissed her gently. As he did so she suddenly drew back with a startled exclamation:

"Oh, Mr. Davis! We are forgetting the torch. Mother will be angry because I do not return. I was only searching the hills for father, and she knew I would not go out of sight of the Blue Cut——"

"Wait, Margaret! You have not answered my question yet," said Davis, keeping hold on her waist. "Before you go, you must say that you love me and that you will marry me and go to Chicago. That will give me the right to protect you—even against your mother!"

The last words were said so bitterly that Margaret trembled a minute, then as she read the love in his eyes, she put her hand in his timidly.

"I will go with you," she said, simply, then she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately.

The next minute they were both on their horses, holding an anxious consultation as to what course to pursue. "I must go to mother," Margaret began, when Davis stopped her.

"Where you go I shall go also, darling. Do you think it advisable for me to ride Queen Bess to the cave under the present conditions?"

"No! A thousand times, no!" cried the girl, quickly. "You would be shot down in cold blood."

"Then that is settled! Suppose we look for the bodies of Hall and the stableman. I'd like to give Hall, at least, a decent burial. After that, if you know the way, we will go straight to the commodore's, and to-morrow we can send word of our marriage to your mother."

"Hello, Davis!"

The call came so unexpectedly that the detective stopped. He was about to set out to find a dead man and had found a live one. Hall came stumping through the bushes, holding both hands to his throat, and in less than a second his friend and Margaret were beside him.

"It's only a flesh wound, old man! Thank God you're alive!"

Margaret tore a strip from her skirt and bound up the wound, then the three went on a little farther until they came across the stableman's body. On the way Davis told Hall the news, and was heartily congratulated by the other detective. His faithful horse was standing by his side, so, after removing his belt and pistols, Hall mounted the horse and the three set off slowly toward the commodore's stables.

"Jess is having a long time in the saddle," said Hall, as they jogged along. "I understand he left the Cinderella mines at daybreak this morning with a sheriff's posse at his heels. He left them behind, thanks to that wonderful horse of his, and was in time to see the first free races and get off with the stakes. Now, the sheriff

has him headed off in three directions, which means that he won't dare to leave the saddle to-night——"

"Hold on!" broke in Davis. "There's another way of escape open! Jess can't cross to Danger City or go east toward the settlement or north toward the Johnson ranch, but what's to hinder him from taking this trail? It's the only one left, so he'll have to take it."

"By jove! I didn't think of that. I thought perhaps he'd make for the Blue Cut Cave."

"Mother is there, and Jess knows she stands in with the sheriff. Oh, I am sure he'll come this way," cried Margaret, in a voice that trembled only for her lover's safety.

"Keep your eye peeled, Hall! Here, sweetheart, you get between us!" said Davis, quickly. "God help that brute if he comes this way! By Heaven, he shall not escape me this time!"

They rode on in silence for some time after that, each scanning the moonlit country with keen glances, and keeping one hand upon the butt of a revolver. But the ride ended with no adventure, and, as they approached the door of the ranch house, the stentorian "Halt!" of the owner sounded like the sweetest music.

Hall gave their names, saying they were "tenderfeet" in that section and related their experience without making known their real errand, and once more the hand of fate seemed to seal Davis' lips, for he choked back a desire to state that they were detectives.

Commodore Stetson appeared to doubt their story at first, but when Hall mentioned that his friend had captured the thoroughbred, he gave a whoop of joy that was echoed in the mountains. Ten minutes later the three riders were seated before a rousing fire, and the commodore's daughter, a pretty girl of eighteen, was doing the honors of her father's establishment.

Hall mentioned the fact that Jesse James was liable to pay them a visit, and, if he had said the devil was coming, the news could not have created more consternation.

Every man on the ranch was routed out of bed, and the stables and corrals were patrolled by horsemen.

There were ten men on the place, and each was a good marksman, so when the detectives finally retired for a little much needed rest they felt that they could do so with perfect safety.

Margaret had already been taken to a room by the commodore's daughter, and as Davis tumbled into bed he felt radiantly happy, for he had really fallen desperately in love with the horsethief's daughter.

He went to sleep wondering if he would be able to keep the secret of her parentage from his friends and family in Chicago, and was dreaming on the same subject when his friend awoke him an hour later.

"Sh! Don't make a sound," whispered Hall, putting

his lips close to his ear. "Just come to the window and listen a minute."

"What the devil is going on? Hold on, Hall! It's only a love affair! The commodore's pretty daughter is holding a tyrost with her lover!" answered Davis, after he had put his ear to a hole in the windowpane and listened a second.

"Must be one of her father's men, then," laughed Hall, "for of course they wouldn't allow any stranger on the premises."

"Sh!"

Davis put his finger to his lips and then leaned nearer to the window, where he was able to overhear a low conversation.

"So they brought back the thoroughbred, did they?" said a masculine voice. "That sounds queer, Louise, and I'm surprised to think that your pa ain't suspicious!"

"Pshaw! They're only tenderfeet!" answered the commodore's daughter, softly. "They happened to be touring Colorado and came out to see the races. I'll tell you what they said, and then you'll know as much as I do."

Here followed a repetition of everything that either Hall or Davis had said regarding their adventures, and when the girl had finished the two detectives stared at each other.

Hall was about to speak when Davis held up his finger again and once more they heard the man's voice distinctly.

"Why didn't you ask the girl who they were, Louise?"

"I did," came the prompt answer, "and she said the same thing. They're just a couple of young fellows who are prospecting through the country. Why, she's going to marry one of them to-morrow and go to Chicago!"

"Chicago, hey! Is that where they hail from?" asked the man's voice, quickly.

"I reckon so, Hank; but what do you care about them, anyway? I thought you came here to see me and——"

A stifled squeal followed, and then there was the sound of kisses, and a minute later the detectives heard the young girl close her window.

The rooms were all on the ground floor, so it was perfectly easy for the conversation to take place, and, as the young men waited silently, they heard a step under their window.

Instantly Davis emitted a snore that would have done credit to a steam engine, and the fellow passed on, evidently believing that the commodore's guests were sleeping.

"By jove! It's lucky we didn't either of us tell our business out here," whispered Davis, softly. "The jig would be up now if we had. Did you hear that fellow jump when she said 'Chicago?'"

"Yes; he knows where the agency is located, no doubt," growled Hall. "Who the devil is he, anyway, and how did he pass our line of pickets?"

"I'm going to find out," muttered Hall, as he began dressing.

The commodore had thoughtfully provided them each with a fresh suit of clothing, and, as Hall began to dress, Davis followed his example.

Their wounds had been attended to before they retired and were giving them very little trouble, although Hall had to move his head carefully so as not to start a hemorrhage, and as they tucked their pistols in their belts both looked at the other significantly.

"We'd better take the bull by the horns," said Davis soberly. "I'm going to wake up the commodore and put him on his guard. I hate to tell tales on a young lady, but this is a serious matter, and I'm as sure as shoot that that fellow was one of Jesse James' spies."

"My opinion, exactly! I'll go and interview the man on guard," began Davis, and just at that minute there came a shriek from Margaret's room, which was followed by a crash of glass and the sound of galloping hooves.

With a yell Davis raised the window sash and leaped to the ground, followed by his friend, who was obliged to move more slowly.

They were just in time to hear another shriek from Margaret; then a man, mounted upon a powerful horse, dashed around the corner of the house and disappeared behind the long line of stables.

"It's Jesse James," roared Davis, the minute he caught sight of the rider.

"Quick! Where are you, commodore? There's treachery here. After that rascal, men! He has kidnapped Miss Bender." Not a sound answered his cry, and Davis made a rush for the stable, half frantic as he heard the galloping hoofbeats growing fainter and fainter. The first stable was locked, and a dead man lay before the door. He could hear the whinnying of horses, but could not get at them.

Hall had rushed back into the house in the meantime, shouting for the commodore, but without getting much as an echo for an answer.

He threw open the doors, one by one, finally discerning the commodore stark dead on the floor of his bedroom, his throat slit from ear to ear, and the bloody knife lying beside him.

Then Hall dashed out of the house, joining Davis in the front yard, and together they shouted an alarm, but there was not a man on the premises who was able to answer.

They found the other eight still sitting their horses

veir different posts, but they were as dazed and stupid as drugged whisky could make them.

"Jesse James has done his work, curse him!" roared Davis. "He found a traitor in the camp and used him to his advantage. The men have been drugged so that they could steal my sweetheart."

"That's about the size of it," was the answer, and then the two went to work with a will, for there was much to be done, and only two to do it.

They helped the dazed men from their horses and took them into the house, and, while Hall tried to revive them, Davis hunted up the key to the stables.

They could not follow the outlaw and leave these men in this condition, for the fact that one of them had died made them think that the stuff was poison.

There was no doubt in the world that the commodore had been poisoned, and when they found time to think of him again, they suddenly thought of his daughter.

Davis tried the door of her room, and finding it unlocked, he opened it and discovered the young girl sound asleep in her bed.

That she was perfectly innocent of all complicity in this awful thing could not be doubted for a moment, so Davis went out and closed the door.

"Time enough when she wakes," he thought as he went back to his labors over the stupefied men, and from that time until broad daylight he was obliged to work ceaselessly.

Only one horse was found missing from the stables, and that was Queen Bess, but Davis was ready to swear that it was his own horse, Fleetwind, that the outlaw was riding.

"It was probably Romeo who stole the horse," said Hall, grimly, "the fellow who was making love to the commodore's daughter."

They had the men all on their feet and able to talk by six o'clock, besides putting the commodore's body into a condition fit to be viewed by his daughter.

One of their number, the men stated, had offered them the whisky, and as he was known to be in love with Louise, the commodore's daughter, no one had dreamed of stopping him from going to her window.

The rest was easy to guess, for no doubt the outlaw had bribed the fellow to do the deed, as he was a man of a not overscrupulous character.

Davis chafed and fumed over the delay in getting after his sweetheart, but when they were ready at last, only three of the men accompanied them, the others remaining to guard Louise and bury her father.

Neither of the detectives could be hard on the girl when they saw her grief, but once more they congratulated themselves on having kept their own council.

As it was, there was no doubt in the minds of the detectives that Jesse James knew exactly who they were, but they were a little mystified by his action in stealing Margaret.

The explanation of this strange deed kept their minds busy for a time, and as they finally dashed from the ranch on the backs of the commodore's best horses, both swore that they would have an explanation.

"Which way?" asked Davis, as they made a detour of the stables and reached the main road.

"Danger City, I think," said Hall, with a look at the men. "If there is any such thing as fording the Saguache!"

Without a word the men formed in line and started toward the river, and for the first few miles not a word was spoken except when it was necessary to curb the horses.

When they reached the river bank at last Davis made a discovery.

A horse had crossed the river at that point but a short time before, for its hoof prints were clearly outlined on the soil of the bank in spite of the fact that not one had been seen before at any point of their journey.

"After him, men! The rascal is ahead!" yelled the young man, excitedly. "Remember the government has offered ten thousand dollars for his head, and I'll give a thousand to the man who restores my sweetheart."

"It's Fleetwind, all right. I know the critter's tracks," said one of the men, after examining the tracks carefully. "Thet thar means thet we're chasin' the Old Nick, an' we're likely to smell brimstone afore we git him."

CHAPTER X.

THE BLUE CUT CREEK.

The horses plunged into the water bravely, and were soon on the other side, when the party began looking for some traces of the outlaw.

"There are no hoofprints here. He must have landed somewhere else," said Davis, after a careful search of the bank.

"We'll divide forces and follow the stream both ways until we find which spot he chose for a landing place. It may give us a clew to his destination," added Hall.

They divided at once, three going up and two down the river bank, and after searching for a few rods a sharp whistle from Davis called them together once more.

"Here they are! And there's three or four of them!" he cried, examining the hoofprints. "He must either have had some one waiting for him on this side, or else these other rascals crossed the river at another point."

"Follow them, Burt," called Hall to one of the men,

"No doubt the girl's lover is one of them, and, of course, if he is, you have a score to settle with him!"

"Curse him, yes!" roared the man. "Let me git er bead on the traitor, an' his own mother won't know him! I'll tattoo him with bullets, the skunk! Snakes! I kin taste that there stuff yet! It was wuss than rattlesnake pizen!"

"After him, then, and no quarter!" roared Davis, who was growing more excited as he followed the hoofprints.

On they went, skirting the hills and following the Saquache as closely as possible, yet still keeping the tracks in view.

"There's no doubt about his destination now. He's made straight for Danger City," said Davis, as they cleared a hedge and landed in a wide road which led directly to the settlement.

"Hello, which way are you heading, Burt?" he added, in some surprise, for the stableman who was leading had suddenly veered to the right and was leaving the outlaw's tracks behind him.

"No use goin' thet thar way, stranger," was the answer. "The Blue Cut Creek makes a bend towards the Saquache a mile further on, an' at this time of the year the current is orful, and ther ain't nothin' but er foot-bridge thet won't do fer hosses. This hyar road will take us straight to the city!"

"But Jesse James went the other way," said Davis, checking his horse stubbornly. "And I'm going to follow those tracks, no matter where they lead me!"

"It's reskin' yer life, stranger!"

"I can't help that. Jess has evidently risked his, and more. He's risked the life of my sweetheart."

"The creek's er mile deep, more or less, at thet p'int," went on Burt, doggedly.

"More 'less,' I reckon! I don't care how deep it is! I am going to keep to the trail! Will any one follow me?"

"I go where you lead, old man!" cried Hall promptly. "Come, men. If Jess can cross the creek, there's no reason why we can't, and we are only losing time by standing here talking."

"All right, stranger. You take the responsibility," said the stableman, turning sullenly. "I ain't afeared of the water myself, but I hate ter lose the hosses, and once in thet thar current yer ain't likely ter git out. It'll float yer like er chip clean down ter ther rim!"

"If Jess's horse can stand it, ours can," said Davis, decidedly, and, taking the lead, he started off in the direction taken by the outlaw.

Leaving the road a few rods farther on, they struck into the lots again, and a short gallop over hills and dales brought them within sound of rushing water.

"Them's ther Blue Cut Falls," remarked Burt, in a gloomy voice. "They come down from ther mountains

like er thousand er brick! Thet thar's what makes the current in the creek so dangerous!"

The thunder of the cataract could be heard plainly, although they were several miles away, and as the roar increased, even Davis looked nervous. But the fear was not for himself. He was thinking of Margaret's danger. He was still at a loss to account for the outlaw's action in stealing the girl, but the fact that he had stolen her was quite sufficient.

If it was within the power of man he meant to get her back, but he knew that this could not be accomplished without the gravest danger.

It was a beautiful morning, the sun shining and the air crisp and clear, and the brave detective felt equal to any emergency, yet not for a moment did he underrate his adversary.

Jesse James was a foeman worthy of any man's steel and his capture meant more glory than any one man could hope for; nevertheless, he was determined to take the robber's scalp if he could, and as he galloped on he kept a sharp lookout ahead, and even rode with one hand upon the butt of his pistol.

Upon the crest of a low hill they caught the first glimpse of the cataract, and, at the same time, Burt pointed out the cloud of smoke that hovered over the little mining settlement known as Danger City.

The distance was now about five miles, but between them and the city was the Blue Cut Creek, whose waters had been swollen by recent rains until they formed a seething, boiling torrent.

The descent into the next valley was made in total silence, for that glimpse of the cataract had dampened even the lover's ardor.

He had no idea of turning back, but the danger ahead had suddenly assumed new proportions, and the buoyant feelings which he had been experiencing seemed overclouded with anxiety.

Suddenly Hall called them sharply, and pointed to a clump of bushes a little to the right, and the next minute he had his pistol in his hand and had drawn the trigger.

"Hold on, there! Don't shoot!" shouted a lusty voice, and the next minute a burly form crept out from under the bushes.

"It's Bob Fields! Hold on, stranger! Put up yer pop. Bob ain't er goin' ter do no damage!" warned Burt promptly.

Davis looked at the fellow sharply, and the conversation which he had overheard between the outlaws came back to him at once. He remembered that Frank James had reminded his brother that he owed Bob Fields money.

If that was the case it did not look well for Bob. It proved that he was a member of the James gang, and an

outlaw, of course; but if he had turned against Jess, he might be of some service.

"What's yer lay, pardner?" asked Burt, pulling in his horse. "Thar's allus sumthin' in ther wind when Bob Fields takes ter skulkin'."

"I reckon thiet's right, pal. Put it there!" exclaimed Fields, striding up and offering his hand to the three stablemen in turn. Then he wheeled around and stared at the two detectives critically.

"Well, how do you like us, Mr. Fields?" asked Davis, sighing. "Anything wrong about us? If there is we'll change it?"

"Who be they?" asked the outlaw of Burt, without taking his eyes from the detectives' faces.

"A couple of the Commodore's friends; leastwise they popped at the ranch last night," said Burt slowly. He then rapidly recounted the events of the previous night.

A low whistle slipped from the outlaw's lips, and almost involuntarily his hand fell to his weapon.

"Where ye bound fer now?" Bob asked.

Davis had been detained long enough, and he now urged his horse forward.

"You heard Burt say that Queen Bess and Margaret under were both stolen last night, didn't you? Well, we are after the thief, who is no one more nor less than Jesse James, and as you owe Jess a grudge suppose you join forces with us?"

"How the deuce did you know that?" asked Fields, staring at the detective.

"I was Jesse James' prisoner for an hour yesterday," said Davis, shortly. "I heard Frank tell him he owed me money, and that he ought to pay it."

"And what did Jess say?" asked Fields, looking vicious. "He said you could go to blazes!" laughed Davis. "He'll pay you or not, as he sees fit, my dear fellow."

"The devil he will! Wait till I clap an eye on him!" roared Fields, losing his head entirely. "Jest let me git me bead on him, and see which on us will go ter blazes! I wait fer him ter come back from ther creek."

"So, Jess is ahead, is he?" asked Davis, quickly.

"Yes; he and Frank and Hank Billin's," was the answer. "I 'lowed they'd come back when they saw the creek, but it's high time they was hyar, and I don't hear nothin' of their horses!"

"Which means that they have crossed, and that we are only wasting time," cried Davis. "Forward, men! The gal will escape if we don't go on! Sorry you haven't a horse, Fields. I'd ask you to join us."

"I reckon now I've got a horse, and a good one, too!" said the outlaw, darting into the bushes and leading out a sleek animal. "Now, then, I'm with you, pardners; ther'll doggoned lot of ye! Any man that hates Jesse

James is my bosom friend! I don't need no other recommendation to him than thet thar sentiment!"

They dashed off together, Davis still in the lead.

"Hi, thar! Thar's ther crick! Ginger! Ain't she jest er whoopin' her up!" called one of the stablemen as they caught a glimpse of the stream pouring through the gorge below them.

"Look at thet thar foam, an' see if yer want ter tackle ther current!" cried Burt, above the noise of the water.

"She's er chunnin' like all possessed," went on Bob Fields, peering down the stream. "Thar ain't no horse kin breast thet thar whirlpool! Now, where ther deuce did Jess go?"

Davis held his breath, and bit his lips as he gazed upon the turbulent waters, wondering if Margaret had found death among those treacherous rocks or had been sucked down the stream by the swift current.

"It's a pretty rough proposition, any way you face it, eh, old man!" said Hall's anxious voice in his ear. "Perhaps we would have done better to have gone the other way——"

"Quick! Look, men! There's some one in the water!" yelled Bob Fields at that minute. "To the right, there, just above the whirlpool on this side. It's Jesse James. I'll swear to it! Look at him, pards! He's ridin' Fleetwind and carryin' er woman!"

CHAPTER XI.

JESSE JAMES' TREACHERY.

The daring outlaw and his fair prisoner were in such terrible danger that for fully a minute the group of horsemen looked on in horror, then, with one accord, they dashed down the last hill to the bank of the creek.

Jesse James was head and shoulders above the surging water, showing that he still sat his noble horse, but Margaret's head was resting on his shoulder, preventing his followers from taking a shot in his direction.

Davis bit his lips as he saw the white foam dashing and churning around his darling's head, and a sigh of relief escaped him as he saw Fleetwind gain a foothold upon the opposite bank.

"Now, then, men! Take careful aim! You can plug him in the back without touching the girl!" said Hall, with his finger on the trigger of his weapon.

But, as if anticipating their movements, Jesse James suddenly raised Margaret in his arms and swung her around behind him in the saddle.

Burt was just on the verge of firing when the change was made, and Davis hit his arm a knock which sent the bullet speeding skyward.

In a second, Jesse James looked over his shoulder and saw the five men lined up on the opposite bank.

Raising himself just a trifle in his stirrups, he took off his hat and swung it tauntingly.

"Blaze away! Ha! Ha! Why didn't you fire?" he yelled.

"You're a coward to hide behind a woman!" cried Davis. "Hold up your head and don't skulk, you cur!"

The outlaw extended both arms over Margaret's shoulders and both weapons spoke at once, a bullet striking Bob Fields' horse and killing it instantly.

"I'll squar' my account with you in Danger City, Jess!" roared Fields, shaking his fist at him across the creek, then he turned and looked at his dead horse ruefully.

"That means that I'll hev ter hoof it around ther road," he said, angrily. "Well, I may's well be off! I'll see yer later, pardners!"

Davis was already in the water, and in a minute the others joined him, but by the time they had reached the opposite bank, there was nothing to be seen of Margaret and her captor.

They had had such a hard struggle in the water that the horses were almost winded, so there was another delay of ten minutes before the chase could be continued.

Following the tracks, they found that Jesse James had overtaken his men, they having crossed the creek before him and the three had skirted the settlement, stopping at last at a sort of tavern which was run by one of the worst characters in Colorado.

This fellow was an ex-horse thief and a friend to all desperadoes, since he depended upon their patronage principally for his livelihood in his present vocation of selling whisky.

He stood in his door as the detectives and their party rode up and, at the very first glance, they saw that he was prepared for them.

Davis said a few words in an undertone to Burt and, a minute later, the stableman drew rein within ten feet of the fellow.

"Howd'y, Mr. Clincher!" he began, coolly. "So Jess James is er guest at ther tavern, is he? Waal, thet thar don't speak well fer yer morals, pardner! Yer can't expect honest men ter patronize yer if yer cater ter cut-throats."

"Ef yer don't like ther company hyar yu kin move on, Burt Welles," was the gruff response, as the red-faced proprietor of the tavern shifted his position in the doorway.

"I reck'n now I'll move when I see fit," retorted Burt. "I'm purty nigh choked fer a drop of whisky! Hyar, fill thet thar flask, Clincher, and be quick erbout it!"

Mr. Clincher, who was better known in Danger City as "Clincher the Bison," caught the empty flask as it was

hurled at his head and shuffled off toward the bar, which was about ten feet distant.

"He's an ugly brute, but he won't let nuthin' interfere with bizness," whispered one of the men. "Jeep keep him er drawin' beer an' er pullin' corks an' Jess will hev ter look out fer himself, I reck'n."

"Here's another, you old bull!" roared Davis, tossing another flask to the rumseller as he shuffled back to the door. "If your liquor is good we'll excuse your company. But where is Jess and his gang? Tell 'em to come and join us. There's no ill-will between us that I know of."

Clincher was standing in the door with the bottle in his hands and an ugly expression on his bloated features.

"I'll fill yer flasks all right, but yer needn't expect nuthin' more of me, stranger," he growled, with a shrewd look at Davis. "Jess is as good as any of you, and he's welcome ter this hyar tavern; tho' p'raps it'll please yer ter know thet he ain't hyar this minute."

"What are you giving us?" roared Davis, pointing the tracks around the door. "There are the prints of his horse's feet right plumb up to the door sill, and not a track leading away from it either, by thunder!"

He made the discovery as he spoke, and at the same minute the others noticed it, and all arrived at once to the same conclusion.

Jesse James had ridden his horse to the door and then ridden inside, where he had been followed by the other two outlaws who accompanied him.

Clincher went to fill the second flask, and the men moved a little distance from the door to hold a consultation.

The tavern was only a one-story log affair, and had only four windows, each of which was guarded by wooden shutters. On each side of the building was an alley, separating it from a cobbler's shop on one side and a store for mining implements on the other, while behind it was an open lot of a dozen acres which sloped to a gentle knoll and then spread out level toward the fringe of woodland.

"Jess must have ridden inter ther tavern and out ther other door," said Burt, speculatively. "He can't be in ther kitchen or settin'-room, unless his horse is with him, and there ain't one of them rooms thet'll hold four human bein's and three horses."

"We must have a look into them just the same," said Davis, decidedly. "Suppose you go around the sharp and see if you can find tracks on the other side. If you can, there won't be any use of our staying here any longer."

"I'm not so sure! Jess may have left the gal and galloped on himself. There's Clincher scowling at you, and he's got yer whisky!"

The stableman started around the shanty as he spoke, and the detective moved his horse to the door and tossed the man a gold piece, then he leaned low in his saddle and peered into the tavern. As he did so, he saw Burt just passing the rear door of the barroom, which stood open. He was stooping in his saddle examining the ground intently.

The next second Davis caught a glimpse of a rope whirling through the air, and, before he could cry out a warning, the noose had settled around the stableman's neck, and was drawn up so tight as to prevent his even breathing.

Davis recovered his breath and let out a war-whoop, then making a dash for the door, he upset Clincher, who was still on the threshold, and went clattering across the wide floor of the barroom.

Two sharp reports from his pistol set the bottles and glasses to jingling, then the lariat was dropped, and Burt clutched at his throat furiously.

Clincher hobbled to his feet with a revolver in his hand, but Hall had a bead on his heart, so he decided not to use it.

"After him! He's on the roof, skulking behind the chimney!" yelled Burt, as he caught his breath. "It isn't Jess, but it's one of his gang! Hanged if I didn't think they'd jerk me inter eternity!"

A volley of bullets struck the enormous stone chimney as he spoke, for the three stablemen had moved so as to get a range in three directions.

"Curse him! He's good at dodgin'!" yelled one of the men, as he dashed around the house, taking a look at all four sides of the square chimney.

The immediate neighborhood was waking up to the fact now that something unusual was going on, and the whet held ten or a dozen natives, mostly old men and women who were not working in the mines, and all were highly amused at the cleverness of the man behind the chimney.

Hall had disarmed the proprietor of the tavern by this time and made him a prisoner in his own barroom, and Davis had taken a look at the other rooms, which, to his great surprise, he found entirely empty.

Suddenly it occurred to him that the lariat-thrower was not behind the chimney; but in it, and he hurriedly whispered his suspicions to Hall, and after that "Clincher the Bison" was bound hand and foot, so he could not interfere with their movements.

"There's some trick in this. Here, Burt, set fire to that paper in the fireplace!" said Davis, sternly. "There's some one in the chimney, and I'm goin to smoke him out, but, Great Scott! Hall, suppose Margaret is in here!"

His face turned pale as he spoke, but at that minute one of the other men came in, bringing Margaret's handkerchief.

"Where did you find it?" asked Davis, grabbing it and putting it in his pocket.

"Ten yards from ther rear door. Jess hez gone on with ther girl," was ther answer. "There's a woman outside here that swears she see 'em cut through the tavern. She 'lows they disappeared in ther woods yonder five minutes afore we got hyar."

"Then I'm going on. You fellows can smoke out that rascal in the chimney alone. Give him a good roasting, boys, for he's one of the murderers! I'm off after Jess and my brave little Margaret!"

He dashed out of the rear door and across the lot toward the woods, but the popping of pistols made him look back over his shoulder.

A man's figure had emerged from the chimney, followed by a cloud of thick, black smoke, and, just as he looked, it toppled over the edge of the stones, striking the roof and bounding over into the alley at one end of the tavern.

Then there was a yell from Hall and the clatter of hoofs, and once more the little band was off after Jesse James and the captive maiden, leaving one dead man and a man in bonds to speak of their brief visit.

"Who was it, Hall?" yelled Davis, over his shoulder, as his companions caught up with him.

"That fellow, Hank Billings—Miss Louise's lover," was the answer. "He lived long enough to say that Jess tricked him into staying there by saying he'd hide the girl in the woods and be back in five minutes. He was so sure Jess would come back that he was watching for him behind the chimney, and when he saw that Burt had found the tracks, he dropped that lariat in order to detain us."

"Well, he did it all right—to his sorrow," laughed Davis. "It's strange; but that is the sort of men that Jess always gets about him. They take their lives in their hands to serve their master, and he tricks them every time!"

"I wonder what will happen when Jess and Bob Fields meet," said Hall, grinning. "Fields hates the fellow, and yet he fears him; still I think he'd put up a good fight if Jess ever cornered him."

"This way, pardners!" called Burt, as he bent lower in the saddle. "Those tracks to the right wasn't made by Fleetwind. They was made by ther feet of a critter double her weight, I reckon."

The detectives stopped short and examined the tracks, which seemed to come from another direction, joining those of the outlaw's horse at that point and then returning.

"That means that Jess has been joined by friends at this point," said Davis, slowly, "who afterward went back the way they came." Then he suddenly drew rein and straightened up in his saddle.

"By Jove! I've thought of something," he said, suddenly. "You fellows go on after the outlaw. I'm going back on the trail of this other horse. I think it's Black Denny, belonging to Mrs. Bender, and Margaret may have gone with her."

"I believe you are right, Davis," said Hall, after a minute. "We were fools not to think of that before. It means just so much time wasted."

A short consultation followed, and the men decided to divide, Davis taking Burt, and Hall the two others.

They were to meet again that night at eleven o'clock at a gambling-house in Danger City.

"I reckon Bob Fields will be thar," said Burt, at parting, "and if Bob sticks it out ter get squar' with Jess, ther game orter be in our hands by midnight, pardners!"

CHAPTER XII.

A CODE OF SIGNALS.

It was eleven in the morning when the men divided forces, and three hours later they were still in the saddle, Hall and his men hot on the outlaw's track, and Davis and Burt, following the trail of Black Denny.

Danger City had been left behind, and the country was fast growing wilder and more desolate, and at last Davis drew rein with a disgusted exclamation.

"Where the deuce does this trail lead to, anyway, Burt?" he asked, as the stableman's horse stopped.

Burt took a sharp look around before he answered, and then consulted a small compass that he took from his pocket.

"I reckon now this hyar leads ter a ranch thet's owned by er feller named Artemus Caulkins!" he answered, finally. "Ther don't nobody know Caulkins, but every body in this hyar section knows ther ranch. Ther's a few hund'ed head o' short horns and some all fired good sheep on it."

"Who runs the ranch?"

"Yer've got me thar! The commodore told me once that he'd seen a mighty fine-lookin' woman on it; but ther commodore allers hed an eye out fer purty females, and I reckon' he was er bit addled with bad rum when he told the story."

"It's strange that no one knows Caulkins, or whatever his name is, for, of course, he hires a lot of men to look after his cattle."

"Not sech er lot of 'em, pardner. An' ther's somethin' strange about thet thar, too. Tain't three times in succession that ther same face is seen at ther ranch, so I reckon thet thar Caulkins is a holy terror. Anyhow, we're likely ter know more about him in an hour, pardner, fer, of course, we'll stop at ther ranch ter git some dinner."

"I expect we'll have to," said Davis, starting up again. "I'm as hungry as a dog, and the horses want water. Further, I confess I'm anxious to see the woman you speak of."

They rode on for another mile, with the detective thinking deeply, and the country growing every minute

rougher and wilder. The path was now only a m trail, leading in a roundabout course between tr bushes and boulders, up hill and down dale, with al no level.

Later on they came upon herds of cattle that seem to be making their way through the bushes to the past lands beyond, and, with a low word of warning, the horsemen drew nearer together.

"Thar's some one behind 'em, I reckon. S'pose we w er minute, pardner, and hev er look at ther feller?"

"All right."

Davis answered quickly, and then moved into bushes, but he knew he had not escaped observation, almost instantly there was the crack of a revolver.

As no bullet came their way the two men knew at o that the report was merely a signal, and, as quick thought, Davis raised his weapon and fired into the

"If one shot means one thing, certainly two shots mean something else," he chuckled. "Now, let's what the fellow will do to get out of that dilemma."

He had hardly spoken when Burt pointed to so thing.

It was a white flag which had suddenly been unfur in the topmost branches of one of the highest trees no hundred yards from where they were hiding.

"Another signal, and this time we are outdon growled the detective. "Now, do you suppose that is tell some one on the ranch that we are coming?"

"I reckon yer've called the turn, pardner," was t stableman's answer. "Now, what's our next play? we go on, or stay hyar?"

"Go on, certainly. What's the good of skulking if t fellow has seen us; and, further, we're not sure that fellow is an enemy. They may be honest people w have taken us for cutthroats."

"Ther's somethin' suspicious about ther ranch," m tered Burt, as he followed Davis out of the bushes. "I in bad favor with ther neighbors round erbout! T say Jesse James is er frequent visitor at ther pla an—"

"By Jove! I know the ranch now! No wonder he visitor there! Why the property belongs to his moth Mrs. Samuels. She comes here on short visits from l home in Missouri!" exclaimed Davis.

As he spoke the detective scanned the bushes carefu

"Where is our friend?" he whispered. "The one t hoisted the white flag. There's the paraphernalia, y der, but not a trace of the lookout!"

Advancing, they reached the foot of the tall tree, a could see the rope dangling at the trunk and the whi flag waving up above them, but whoever had given t signals had taken French leave, and, what was more, had not left so much as a footprint behind him.

Burt was off his horse in a minute, and up in the tr and as he reached a high branch he called down excited "Thar 'tis! Thar's ther ranch, er leetle ter ther east! feller could run over ther place without knowin' 'tw thar. Hello! Thar's four horsemen er standin' at th ranch house gate, an' I'll be hanged ef I don't think i yer chum an' ther boys, pardner!"

"Then we'd best get a move on, and be quick abo it," said Davis. "For if the boys are there it means t have tracked the outlaws to the place, and they're lik to need us in a precious few minutes!"

Burt dropped down from the tree, and was in his saddle in a jiffy, and then the two made all haste possible to join their companions.

When they finally swept into the clearing in front of the house the four riders were still at the gate, and Davis could see that they were in conversation with an elderly woman.

He and Burt joined them without a word, only saluting the woman politely. Then Mrs. Samuels, for it was she, went on with the conversation.

"Jess is not here, gentlemen," she seemed to be repeating. "If he was I should not be afraid to tell you, for Jess can protect himself against a hundred."

"But we have followed Fleetwind's tracks right straight to this gate," said Hall, sternly.

"I have no need to lie, gentlemen," said the old woman, proudly. "I have said that Jess is not here, and that Fleetwind is in her stable. Now, if you wish to know where the girl is I am perfectly willing to tell you. She is in my house in the company of her mother!"

"Old Mag Bender, the horsethief's wife!" burst out Davis, angrily.

"Madam, do you intend to allow us to enter your house or not?" Davis continued. "I am sick of this parleying, and I wish to see Miss Bender."

As quick as a flash the old woman pulled a pistol from her pocket and began backing up the path, while she fairly screeched her ultimatum.

"No! A thousand times, no! Not one of you shall put a foot across my threshold except it be over my dead body!"

"Nonsense! No one wishes to harm you, madam; but we must have Miss Bender," said Davis, angrily.

"Then come and get her!" shrieked the woman, still backing away. "I tell you, the first man to pass that gate shall answer with his life, and what's more, every entrance to my house is guarded! We can pick you off one by one, and we will do it. I swear it! Now, come on, if you dare! The outcast's mother defies you!"

The men looked at each other with blank faces at this. Then, as Hall scanned the ranch house eagerly, he was able to prove her statements.

From each window protruded a rifle, and there were three dark forms up on the roof, while the low stables in the rear had mounted guns at every angle.

If they had anticipated a siege the place could not have been better protected, and, as the men overlooked the warlike preparations, the outlook grew gloomy.

"Hanged if I'll go away without her," muttered Davis, savagely. "I say, can't we fire the place and blow it to thunder—"

"And blow up your sweetheart with it! That would hardly do," laughed Hall. "We must think of something cleverer than that to fool that old creature."

Mrs. Samuels had gained the door now, and was shaking her fist at them savagely, and, as she finally stepped inside, a little porthole in the door flew open.

"The place is a perfect arsenal! It would take a battering ram to force it!" growled Davis. "Suppose we retire to the bushes and hold a consultation. I have a scheme that may be made to work, but I'm open to any suggestions that you fellows have to offer."

They moved back for several rods until they were out

of sight of the house, and then Davis unfolded his plan, which was considered a very good one.

Burt was sent back by a roundabout course to the tree from which the white flag floated, and, after a little searching, he found a black one, which he promptly ran up, while he lowered the other.

The black flag fluttered a minute, and then was caught in a gust which wrapped it around the limb like a piece of sticking plaster.

In a second he was up in the tree, shaking out the black folds, and as he balanced himself on a frail limb, he heard a loud laugh below him. Looking down he saw two men, both with their revolvers full upon him, and in an instant he saw that one was Jesse James, the outlaw.

"Hello, stranger! How's the weather up there?" called Jesse James, sarcastically. "I'll just trouble you to take in that black rag, and run out the other again, you sinner! An effort to draw a weapon will send you straight to the devil!"

Burt had no chance but to obey the order, but he ground his teeth in rage at being treed by the outlaw.

His only hope now was that the two detectives would come to investigate the change in signals, so, after shaking out the white flag again he clung to the limb and waited.

"Now, then, stranger, let's have your name," said Jesse James again, following the command with an ominous click of his pistol.

Burt saw that lying would do no good, so he promptly told his name and the names of his companions.

"Ha! ha! So one of them is Al Davis!" said the outlaw, drawing a paper from his pocket. "Are you sure, now, that the other isn't called either Williams or Carter?"

"Sure! His name is Hall," said the stableman, stubbornly. "What's the use of me lyin' when I'm treed like er catermount? I've told yer all I know, Jess James. Them two chaps was friends of ther commodore's. What ther bizness is hyar is more'n I know, except thet thet thar feller Davis is er goin' ter marry Miss Bender."

"Oh, he is, is he?" roared Jesse James. "Well, I congratulate the fellow! She's as pretty as they make 'em, and as full of pluck as a cartridge. So you didn't even guess that those chaps were detectives?"

"I mout'er guessed it, but I didn't know fer sure," was the surly answer. "'Twarn't my biz ter speckillate on ther commodore's friends, an' I reck'n now if they air detectives they won't do me no damage."

"No; they're after bigger game than an ex-horse thief," laughed the outlaw. "They're after me, curse them; but they'll never get me! I'll see them feeding the wolves with their bones before they leave Colorado."

"I reckon thet's right, Jess! Thet thar's what gen'rally happens ter yer enemies if reports is true," groaned Burt; "but ez I don't happen ter be er detective s'pose yer let me down. It's mighty onpleasant playin' tree toad, Jess, an' yer kin do what yer please arter I strike terry firmy."

"You'll do well enough where you are for a time," answered the outlaw, coldly. Then, replacing the paper in his pocket, he said a few words to his companion.

"Keep him up there, Bones," the outlaw called out as he started back.

"Look out, cap'n! Thar was two on 'em, I'm sure," warned the other, softly.

"Then keep your eye peeled for him, too, and, if you see him, run out both flags at once. I'll look back now and then, and keep watch of the signals."

"Suppose that fellow up there balks?" asked Bones, in a questioning voice.

"Then pump him full of lead, and run up the signals yourself," said the outlaw promptly, after which he struck into the bushes and started off in the direction of the ranch house.

Burt was in a position commanding the distant ranch, and just at that minute he saw his four companions emerge from the bushes and come out into the road where Jesse James, as soon as he mounted the next knoll, would be sure to see them.

The blood leaped to his head and he shut his teeth hard, while he almost prayed that something would tell them to go back into the bushes.

If they would stay under cover five minutes longer they would see the famous outlaw dash across the clearing to the house, and it would be the chance of their lives to put a bullet through him.

The black flag was still in his hand, while the white one fluttered. If he could exchange the two it would put the detectives on their guard, and in another minute the greatest rascal on record would be killed or captured. The temptation was so great that Burt forgot his own danger or decided to sacrifice his own life for the good of the country.

Acting with the quickness of the animal to which he had likened himself, he scrambled out on the limb and exchanged the signals.

A gust of wind fluttered the black folds boldly, and Burt had time to see the four horsemen dart behind the trees, when something struck him squarely in the side and seemed to plow a furrow through him. He let go of the limb and fell like a log at the feet of the man who had obeyed orders and shot him. A minute later the murderer was in the tree, and the white and black flags were flung to the breeze together.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE OUTLAW'S NARROW ESCAPE.

With his usual luck, Jesse James looked back at the very instant that his man exchanged the signals, and like a shot out of a gun he wheeled his horse and dashed back to the tree.

"What is it, Bones?" he called out, as he saw the stableman lying in a heap under the tree.

"He changed the flags, an' I shot him, cap'n," explained the man. "I reckon now he and his pal had some understandin'."

"Which you have knocked in the head! Now, then, we must go easy, Bones, if the other fellow is skulking in the bushes. Suppose you go up and have a look around," said Jesse James, promptly.

Bones was up in the tree like a flash, and creeping out on the limb he furled the black flag, and then drawing a small field glass from his pocket he looked the ground over carefully.

"There's er white flag on ther ranch house, Jess," he called down.

"Which means that mother has seen your signal, and

is on her guard——" began the outlaw, when the fellow interrupted him.

"Thar goes a red one! Hullo! Thar's sumthin' wrong Jess! Thar's four men in the clearin', all er gazin' at this hyar tree! Hanged if I don't think they're besiegin' ther ranch house."

"Mother can take care of the place. Describe them Bones. Are the horses from Commodore Stetson's stables?"

"I reck'n they are, cap! I kin make out one of ther riders. Cursed ef it ain't thet thar feller thet tried tere murder yer, Jess! Ther scamp thet said he was Binkus Bender, ther hoss thief!"

"Ha! ha! Exactly what I thought. So he was at the commodore's ranch last night! If I'd been sure of it I'd have fired the place, but I hated to burn up the commodore's pretty daughter."

"I reckon they know you're hereabouts, Jess; they're searchin' the bushes, an' not botherin' ther house," went on the man.

"So much the better, but I must be off, Bones. Come down and we'll make for the old tavern in Muddy Gorge. I'll be as stiff as a post if I spend many more hours in the saddle."

The man dropped from the tree and led his horse out of the bushes, while Jesse James tightened his stirrups and had a look at his weapons.

"There's a dozen of the boys at the Gorge," he went on, "And the plan for a scoop to-night is already in operation. We've found where some dust is hid, and we know who hid it, and all we've got to do is——"

Crack!

A bullet whizzed by the speaker's ear, and imbedded itself in a tree, and Jesse James was in his saddle and off like a shot, with his man behind him.

"Nearly winged him, Davis! Whoop! After him, boys!" yelled Hall, and the four horsemen, who had come within firing distance while the outlaws talked, dashed pell mell through the bushes.

"I thought I had a bead on him, but my horse stepped in a hole," groaned Davis. "It's just my luck. I'll never get as near him again. Great Scott! What a country!"

"Come on! Never say die!" yelled Hall, who was putting his horse over rocks and bushes. "We'll get a glimpse of him in a minute when he strikes that clearing."

He urged his horse onward to what looked like a low hedge, beyond which was a clear space stretching out for some distance.

"Thar he is! Give it to him!" roared one of the men, as the outlaw's head could be seen for a second on the other side of the hedge.

Hall raised his weapon to fire as he made another sprint, but in a flash the outlaw disappeared. The detective's horse was gathering for the leap over the hedge, which was an unusually high one.

"Hold on! Go easy, old man. There's a precipice on the other side!" yelled Davis, who had caught a glimpse of something.

His warning came too late, for Hall was over, his horse finding barely a foothold on the other side before it half jumped and half fell from the narrow ledge of rock, whose treacherous edge was hidden by the hedge row.

The crack of a revolver sounded before he had fairly struck, and Davis pulled his horse up just in time to save

himself the jump, and the next minute the horse Hall had been riding galloped off without him.

In an instant they all knew exactly what had happened. The ledge of rock extended for several rods, and there was no other way of advancing without jumping it.

As the rock shelved out a little it formed an excellent protection for any one underneath on the other side, and it was plain that Jesse James and his man had taken advantage of this protection.

Their horses, being acquainted with the spot, had taken the double jump in safety, and they now waited for their pursuers to follow them over the hedge, when they would have both horses and men completely at their mercy.

Hall, however, was their only victim, as the others discovered the trap in time to avoid it.

Jesse James could not move from his position without their getting a bead on him, but they were beyond his reach, and he was beyond theirs so long as he remained under this natural fortress.

Davis would have given a great deal to know if Hall was dead, but to go to his assistance would be the direct way, for the outlaws had it all their own way with any one who jumped the ledge, and would soon put an end to their entire party.

"We'll have to stay here and tire him out," he said to the two stablemen. "The fellow has business to attend to, so he can't stay there forever."

The three horsemen separated themselves by a few yards, and then sat their horses and waited patiently for the outlaws to move, but there was not a sound under the ledge after that first report, and the time dragged slowly by, until they were both hungry and thirsty.

Davis felt bad enough for himself, but he pitied Margaret more, for, of course, the girl would know that he was searching for her, and she was probably distressed beyond measure, not knowing what might have befallen him.

He ground his teeth when he thought of how he was spending his wedding day, but every minute of waiting made him more determined to find her.

Darkness was creeping on, and yet there was hardly movement under the ledge, the occasional snort of a horse being the only proof that the outlaws were still in hiding.

"He's waiting fer it to git dark so's he kin run ther antlet," muttered one of the men. "Curse him! I reck'n now I kin see ez well as he kin. Ef Jess James scapes us this hyar time, he's sumthin' more'n human."

"Sh! Thar's some-one comin'," whispered the other stableman, turning and looking over his shoulder. "Great snakes! S'pose it's ther rest of his gang! We'd be done er, pardner! Thar ain't no goin' ahead nor no goin' back. I reck'n now——"

"Shut up a minute! There's only one!" ordered Davis, when the detective dropped to the ground, putting his ear to the earth to listen for hoofbeats.

At that minute a low whistle was wafted to their ears, and the three men on the ledge waited to see if Jesse James would answer it.

Five minutes passed without a sound, and then three peculiar bird notes came from the same direction, and were promptly answered by the men in hiding.

"That settles it, boys! We are trapped!" whispered Davis, softly. "You two turn your faces towards the newcomers, while I keep my eye peeled for Jess."

Once more the bird notes were given and answered, and soon the bushes began to crackle as though a horse was passing through them.

"Thet thar's strange! Ther feller's alone, whoever he is," whispered one of the men again. "Thet thar's makin' it most too easy, pardner. I kin pick him off the minute his head pops through ther brush yonder."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry, my friend," warned Davis. "I hate to see a man murdered unless he's an enemy. Sh! There he is now! Go slow, old fellow." The crackling and stamping had come nearer as he spoke, and a man's head had suddenly appeared above the bushes, but the dusk was settling so heavily now that not one of the horsemen got a glimpse of his features.

"He's seen us, all right," muttered one of the men, as the head disappeared and another shrill signal cut the air with its sharpness.

This signal was answered exactly like the others, and then the men caught the sound of whispers under the ledge and knew that the outlaws were consulting together.

"Hi, thar!" cried out one of the detective's men. "Who ther devil be ye? Better speak right out, stranger, seein' how we're three to one," he said, warningly.

"I'm er lookin' fer Jesse James," came from the bushes, after a minute.

"Thet thar don't tell nothin', stranger. What do yer want of him?"

"Satisfaction. He owes me five hundred dollars," said the voice again.

The stableman burst out laughing, and then spoke in his natural voice.

"Snakes! Is it you, Bob Fields? Why in thunder didn't yer say so. We're frum ther commodore's stable; now yer know us, don't yer?"

"I'm with yer heart and hand, then, pardner," said Fields, moving forward. "I've rid from Danger City sence noon, an' a deuce of a time I've had ter track him. So he's under thet thar ledge, is he, curse him! Jest wait till I get thar, an' I'll show yer sumthin'! Thar's tricks in every trade, by ginger!"

He moved forward rapidly, the stableman keeping a few feet in advance and telling the others who he was before he got to them.

"Now, then, come on boys! We'll flush our quarry all right!" yelled Fields, as he broke a branch from a dry bush. "We'll skin ther daylights out o' thar beasts, and make 'em stampede. Thet thar'll run 'em out ther quickest of anything, I reckon."

He set fire to the branch as he spoke, and dropped it, crackling and flaming, over the edge of the precipice.

In an instant there was a tremendous snorting and stamping. Then a man that looked like Jesse James dashed out into view, waving the burning brand in circles around his head, while he yelled curses of defiance at the men above him.

In a second four revolvers were turned in his direction, but, with a lightning-like bound, he was upon the back of the frightened horse and galloping away, with the

fiery bush still gyrating around him, and sending a shower of sparks down upon the back of his mount.

Crack! crack! went the revolvers of the men, and the horse stopped abruptly about forty yards from the foot of the ledge.

At that second another horse and rider dashed from under the rock, and two more pistols sent their leaden missiles after him.

"Whoop! Hurrah! Down with Jesse James! We've got him, boys!" yelled Davis, excitedly, as the burning bush fell to the ground and the dauntless rider reeled in his saddle.

"Never mind the other devil! Shoot ther bandit king!" roared Fields, and once more his weapon was aimed in the direction of the first rider.

The horse dropped without a sound, his rider rolling off of his back like a log, but his companion disappeared in the darkness like one of the many shadows, while another volley of bullets sang around him harmlessly. Then Bob Fields put his horse over the ledge, landing in good shape on the ground seven feet below, and the next minute he was bending over the prostrate body of the outlaw. Davis and the stablemen followed, all landing safely, and Davis had just reached his friend's body when Fields yelled an imprecation.

"It ain't Jess, after all! It's only 'Bones'! Curse ther feller, I believe he's ther devil himself! Thar can't nuthin' kill him; not even er bullet!"

"I'd er sworn 'twas Jess," began one of the stablemen, disgustedly.

"So would I. He's got on Jess's togs, thet thar's ther reason, pardner. 'Tain't ther first time he's made one of his slaves die fer him, yer kin bet."

Bob Fields had left the fallen outlaw, and gone over to Davis as he spake, and found the detective holding Hall's head on his knees.

"'Tain't no use, pardner. Yer friend's cashed in his checks," he said, consolingly. "Now ther only thing ter do is ter squar' yer account with Jess, an' I reck'n as how I'm ther one ter help yer do it."

Davis ground his teeth and choked back his emotion, and was able to help the others put Hall's body upon one of the saddles.

"I must get Margaret out of his clutches first," he said, desperately. "After that I'll hunt him to the ends of the earth. I'll hound him to his death, or mine!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CONCLUSION.

Jesse James, the outlaw, had escaped him again, but he was still firm in his determination to capture him ultimately.

They buried Hall's body by moonlight, and then started back towards Mrs. Samuel's ranch, for even Fields was eager to rescue Miss Bender.

They found the ranch house in darkness and deserted by every specimen of the masculine gender, nor was there anything to be seen of the outlaw's mother.

In the woods nearby they came suddenly across Margaret, who was sitting upon a fallen log, weeping over the dead body of her mother. The old woman had

tripped, with her revolver in her hand, and a bullet through her heart had ended her career forever.

The meeting between Davis and his sweetheart was affecting that even Bob Fields looked away, but Margaret was finally able to tell her story.

It seemed that Jesse James had waylaid and killed the sheriff and part of his posse that night, and then, seeing the burning torch, he visited the Blue Cut cave, a wrong from Mrs. Bender a knowledge of all of the sheriff's misdemeanors.

In return for information he promised to restore Margaret to her arms, but he did not omit stealing the thoughbred upon the same occasion.

Who killed Commodore Stetson was never known, but it was supposed to be Hank, Miss Stetson's unscrupulous lover, who had hated the old gentleman for some time and had often threatened him.

Davis and his companions buried Mag Bender near "Artemas Caulkins'" ranch, then the party went back to the commodore's together, where Louise was delighted to provide them with shelter.

A man to perform the marriage ceremony could not be found for some days, and, as Davis left his betrothed to accompany Bob Fields to Danger City, and did not return when he was expected, the delay was one of the greatest uneasiness. When he did return, it was with a gloomy brow, for once more the clever bandit king had outwitted him and made off with a pile of gold dust rigid under the noses of the natives of Danger City.

Jess had timed his raid when the miners were all at work, and even the detective was killing time by napping.

His men had entered the town one by one, some in women's clothing, and seven murders had been committed without a pistol speaking.

When the town did awake to the fact that it had been robbed, seven men, with their throats cut from ear to ear, were left to tell the story of the outlaw's methods.

After that there were frequent scares that the James gang were coming, but in reality Jesse James was far away. There was not wealth enough in that section to make a long stay there profitable.

Davis and Miss Bender were finally married, but they settled in Colorado, for the detective was determined to remain as long as there was a doubt that the outlaw was still in that section, but when he knew he had gone, he moved his own quarters also.

Louise Stetson sent East for her father's brother to come and look after the ranch, and a year later she married a fine young man who was in Colorado prospecting.

Queen Bess was never returned to the commodore's stables, but was used by Jesse James on many of his famous rides when Fleetwind could not be risked to carry him to the end of his journey.

His ride through Colorado embraced several hundred miles, and no one could prove that at any time he was more than ten minutes out of the saddle, and that was only when it was necessary for him to change saddles or horses.

THE END.

Next week's JESSE JAMES STORIES (No. 16) will contain "Jesse James on the Mississippi; or, The Duel at Midnight," detailing the outlaw's exciting experiences at one of the floating gambling palaces, as the old-time Mississippi steamboats used to be called.

JESSE JAMES STORIES



Jesse James.

WE were the first publishers in the world to print the famous stories of the James Boys, written by that remarkable man, W. B. Lawson, whose name is a watchword with our boys. We have had many imitators, and in order that no one shall be deceived in accepting the spurious for the real we shall issue the best stories of the James Boys, by Mr. Lawson, in a New Library entitled "The Jesse James Stories," one of our big five-cent libraries, and a sure winner with the boys. The first four issues are: "Jesse James, the Outlaw. A Narrative of the James Boys," "Jesse James' Legacy; or, The Border Cyclone," "Jesse James' Dare-Devil Dance; or, Betrayed by One of Them," "Jesse James' Black Agents; or, The Wild Raid at Bullion City."

STREET & SMITH, Publishers, New York.

NICK CARTER STORIES



Nick Carter.

THE best known detective in the world is Nick Carter. Stories by this noted sleuth are issued regularly in "Nick Carter Weekly" (price five cents), and all his work is written for us. It may interest the patrons and readers of the Nick Carter Series of Detective Stories to know that these famous stories will soon be produced upon the stage under unusually elaborate circumstances. Arrangements have just been completed between the publishers and Manager J. C. Whitney, to present the entire set of Nick Carter stories in dramatic form. The first play of the series will be brought out next fall.

STREET & SMITH, Publishers, New York.

BUFFALO BILL STORIES

The only publication authorized by
the Hon. Wm. F. Cody (Buffalo Bill.)



Buffalo Bill.

WE were the publishers of the first story ever written of the famous and world-renowned Buffalo Bill, the great hero whose life has been one succession of exciting and thrilling incidents combined with great successes and accomplishments, all of which will be told in a series of grand stories which we shall now place before the American boys. The first of these stories entitled "Buffalo Bill, the Border King," appears in No. 1 of our new **five-cent** library entitled "The Buffalo Bill Stories."

STREET & SMITH, Publishers, New York.

DIAMOND DICK STORIES



Diamond Dick.

THE celebrated Diamond Dick stories can only be found in "Diamond Dick, Jr., The Boy's Best Weekly." Diamond Dick and his son Bert are the most unique and fascinating heroes of Western romance. The scenes, and many of the incidents, in these exciting stories are taken from real life. Diamond Dick stories are conceded to be the best stories of the West and are all copyrighted by us. The library is the same size and price as this publication with handsome illuminated cover. Price five cents.

STREET & SMITH, Publishers, New York.